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Girls of Easy Virtue

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The University of Southern Mississippi

GIRLS OF EASY VIRTUE

by

Elizabeth Anne Wagner

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

August 2011

ABSTRACT

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This is a collection of four stories I have written during my time in the Center for Writers at the University of Southern Mississippi.

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INTRODUCTION

I believe I am like most people who study fiction writing in that I came to fiction writing with a desire far greater than my ability. I wanted to write, but I did not know how to do it. The longer I studied writing and the more stories I read, the less certain I became of what a story was and how a story was made. Because of this difficulty, writing fiction, at least for me, quickly became a process of experimentation. The nature of this experimentation has to do with not only the unknown elements, the subconscious, but also with the known elements, the technical, problem solving elements. I believe a writer's approach to experimentation in both of these areas begins in the self. This echoes Flannery O'Connor's notion of personality: "Art is the habit of the artist; and habits have to be rooted deep in the whole personality" (O'Connor 101). What we write comes out of who we are and we have limited control over that: it has to do with our experience, what we are interested in and what we like, what we have read and what we have not read. It also comes out of what we are able to do. A writer may know that he should vividly dramatize a scene, but this knowledge does not necessarily translate into ability because there is not much to guide or instruct a writer beyond examples from other writers and no two writers will dramatize in exactly the same way. Ultimately he has got to figure out how to dramatize that scene through his own trial and error and the specific character of this trial and error will come from his own experience and personality.

Because of the necessity of "not-knowing" and experimentation, learning to write fiction, for me, has been a matter of putting faith in my own inclinations and tendencies

within this process of experimenting. In other words, faith in oneself is a major part of writing fiction and this speaks to the two most valuable things I have learned in workshop. The first is that I must cultivate my own vision of world and not be afraid of it. The difference between the way I see things and the way other people see things—my own disparity and oddness— is what will make the work interesting. The second thing is that I am better off writing things that make me uncomfortable. This can apply in regard to subject matter, but it can also apply to the problem of writing in a way that seems different from the way other people write, a way that might turn out to be completely wrong. The best example I can think of here comes from one of Hugh Kenner's essays about F. Scott Fitzgerald:

> To list his array of devices so casually is not to underrate the expertise of *Gatsby*, but to note how inductively the expertise was acquired. He did not so much isolate and reflect upon techniques as observe himself responding to what he read, and sort out what had made for comfortable or uncomfortable reading. When after too many pages of preparation one novelist let something happen—a newborn's cry—Fitzgerald found this event without significance "except the strained one of making the reader think—'Well, after all that climb it must mean more than I think it does!'" That was his chief gift, fidelity to his own responses. Reading in this way, reading everything—*War and Peace*, well-machined junk—he remained quarter-educated, but he learned to set up situations and manage transitions without fuss. (Kenner 35)

Fitzgerald learned how to work from who he was and he learned how to isolate the vitality of his own interests. Most of the criticism Fitzgerald's work receives stems from this, but it seems to me the most important thing a writer can learn. Fidelity to one's own responses is a brave thing. It is also the easiest way to cultivate an independent vision of the world. As I try to improve my own work, I know that it's important to remember this. Though the stories included in this manuscript have been revised extensively, I still

find that they are often too long and too heavy; sometimes there are just too many words (notice even here my maddening use of "sometimes" and "just"). I see this and know that it must be changed, but I also recognize that this change must be careful. I must not learn to write a different way; I must learn how to write the way I write, only better.

One example of this process of experimentation can be found in my focus on making a story with pieces that fit together and create a realistic sense of cause and effect. I focus on the creation of cause and effect because it has been the most difficult element of writing short stories for me, and because I focus on this element I do not worry too much about controlling other elements of the story. Much of the higher order work of my fiction writing—depth of character, texture, atmosphere, the accumulation of connected detail, and the overall creation of meaning—are done almost subconsciously. I deliberately do not think too much about many of my choices, especially those that have to do with selection of detail. Instead, by putting more conscious emphasis on the creation of a realistic causality, my subconscious mind is allowed to work more freely on the higher order elements. Many writers have written about this process of "not-knowing."[1] Writing, to me, becomes a balancing act of the known elements—the elements that I am consciously trying to control—and the unknown elements—the elements that I am trusting to my subconscious mind.

To illustrate this balancing act, I will look at the most recent story in this collection, "One Way to Find Out." This is the most complete and well-constructed of the four. In this story, I had no idea that there would be such a focus on mothers. I had in

[1] For example, in his essay "On Writing," Donald Barthelme calls writing "a process of dealing with not-knowing, a forcing of what and how" (12). He writes, "Without the scanning process engendered by not-knowing, without the possibility of having the mind move in unanticipated directions, there would be no invention" (12).

my mind a woman who had once been very close to her brother but was no longer close to him. I started to imagine this woman dealing with the real feeling of losing someone who is both your peer, but also your responsibility. After I had spent some time with this feeling and this woman, I began to imagine a situation in which this loss might have occurred. The situation I imagined was one where the siblings were bonded by their childhood with a mentally ill mother. I chose this situation because I hoped that their past with their mother would heighten the drama of the story and hold the reader's attention. After I wrote the first draft, I found that the story was unbalanced and too subtle. The character's emotional difficulty was present, but the external situation—the cause and effect of this difficulty—did not seem to justify it, leaving the reader confused, unconvinced, and bored. I had to figure out a way to make the emotional risk of the story match the events that were creating this risk. This is the problem solving of fiction writing. One of the ways I decided to solve this problem (with the help of my faithful reader SB) was to make Andrea pregnant and concerned about her fitness as a mother. Through striking a balance between the creation of a character with a real emotional difficulty and the construction of a story that was interesting and believable to the reader, the theme of motherhood, and perhaps some notion of what it means to be a child, came to the forefront.

The examination of my process, this balancing act, uncovers some of my assumptions and goals in relation to fiction writing. First of all, I want my fiction to entertain the reader. I start with this not because it is the most important goal, but because it is, to my mind, the most basic and also the most constraining. My definition of entertainment in literature comes from Jorge Luis Borges. Here he explains why people

find personal enjoyment in literature: "The individual is getting away from his personal circumstances and finding his way into another world, but at the same time, perhaps that other world interests him because it's nearer his inner self than his circumstances" (Borges 63). I try to remember this quotation when I begin writing a story because it helps me with the process of translating my own experience and my own emotions into something that would be more interesting to other people, a story that has some element of escape. This notion of the reader's enjoyment is basic to fiction writing because the audience is a voluntary one: the first reason to read fiction is because you want to read fiction. As Borges points out, fiction has at least two uses. Fiction is a way to escape into another world and it is also a way to awaken or communicate with the inner self. To me, the second use is the more important one, but it cannot be accessed if the first use—reading for the sake of escape—is not available to the audience. The constraints of escape and entertainment imply that the reader must not have to work too hard, that she never be too confused or too bored, that she must always understand why I am doing what I am doing. This constraint affects the way I realize the other half of Borges's quotation, that secondary, but more important use of reaching out to the reader's inner self. Thinking about the realization of this second use makes me aware of other elements and goals of my fiction.

With fiction, I want to remind the reader that our inner lives are just as real as our outer lives. In the story I previously discussed, this goal might be visible in the focus on Andrea's emotional struggle and the importance she places on how she feels about her relationships with other people. The true conflict of the story is an emotional one. When I think about this emotional conflict, I am reminded of a common discussion at the

workshop level, the discussion of "what a character wants." One often hears members of workshops questioning stories in this way: "I'm not sure I understand what the character wants." In my story, Andrea does not want another person. She does not want a different life or a chance at starting over. Basically, she wants everything to feel okay. She wants to know that she and her brother are emotionally and mentally stable. Nothing that she wants is exactly tangible. It is all emotional and this focus on the emotional helps to remind the reader that our inner lives are real.

The style of my writing lends itself toward this focus on inner life because it is discursive and focused on the main character's reaction to the world around her. I am heavily influenced by Virginia Woolf and I try to copy the way she demonstrates the movement of human consciousness and the individuality we find in that movement. For an example, I offer this passage from *To the Lighthouse*. Mrs. Ramsay is reading aloud to her son, James:

> 'Well, what does she want then?' said the Flounder. And where were they now? Mrs. Ramsay wondered, reading and thinking, quite easily, both at the same time; for the story of the Fisherman and his Wife was like the bass gently accompanying a tune, which now and then ran up unexpectedly into the melody. (Woolf 56)

If I read this passage in a meta-fictional way, it explains to me how Woolf allows Mrs. Ramsay's thoughts to be the primary element of the novel. These thoughts are the melody and they run alongside the external events of the novel. They are only occasionally overshadowed by these events in the same way that Mrs. Ramsay's thinking is her primary focus as she reads and this thinking is only occasionally interrupted by the bass line of the Fisherman's story. It is as if Woolf sees our inner lives and our outer

lives running alongside each other independently, influencing each other, but only occasionally touching.

This method creates a difficulty for the reader, however. Many people have told me they've avoided *To the Lighthouse* because it seems confusing. I do not think this difficulty is serious enough to hinder enjoyment. In fact, I think it gives the reader freedom to let go of knowing and allows him to simply experience the writing. Nevertheless, throughout the process of learning to write my own stories I have found that I do not have the skill and the reputation of Virginia Woolf and therefore I cannot afford to try my reader's patience for too long in such a way. That's one reason why I have to focus on balancing the internal and the external. In "One Way to Find Out," my concern is primarily with Andrea's emotional desires, but if I only present the reader these desires there is a chance he may not be satisfied. To make the story function as well as it can, I have to make sure there is also an external desire motivating Andrea: she also wants to be sure she's fit to be a mother and that her possible unfitness does not destroy her marriage. This desire is more concrete and therefore it gives the reader something stable to connect with if he is not moved by Andrea's less tangible motivations. I think this is also an example of the way constraint works as opportunity in fiction writing. My need to satisfy the reader forces me to strengthen my powers of invention.

My favorite paragraph of *To the Lighthouse* better illustrates the way I use consciousness in "One Way to Find Out." Again, Mrs. Ramsay is reading to her son, James:

> "Come in or go out, Cam," she said, knowing that Cam was attracted only by the word "Flounder" and that in a moment she would fidget and fight with James as usual. Cam shot off. Mrs. Ramsay went on reading, relieved, for she and James shared the same tastes and were comfortable together. (Woolf 56)

Here Woolf's use of Mrs. Ramsay's thought process is more fully woven into the narrative. The thoughts don't last too long and they are more directly connected to what is happening externally. I try to follow this model of weaving when I am writing fiction:

> She shook her head and immediately regretted it. She liked how he had wanted to share. They watched Nora line up the cards and Andrea felt like they were at a dance recital or a kindergarten play. They should have been running the camera, keeping record of Nora's improvements. Andrea put her hand on her brother's shoulder.

First and foremost, this passage shows that I am no Virginia Woolf, but it also shows my attempt at weaving Andrea's thoughts into the external action of the story in a way that the reader can clearly understand.

**

A couple of years ago, a fellow student helped me understand something about how my fiction works. He pointed out something that seems very simple, but, looking back at this experience, I realize that what he said helped me to understand how something becomes interesting to the reader and how this interest is connected to the interest of the writer. I had a story up in workshop. It was bad story, one that has never functioned as a story and maybe never will. My fellow student acknowledged that, in a way. He told me that there were things he liked about the story, pleasant images and observations that seemed true, but, for all that good stuff, the story still didn't work. There was one place, however, that bloomed in his mind. That was the word he used: bloomed. In and of itself, the choice of this word teaches me something about fiction.

The kind of fiction I am trying to write goes beyond the surface of the story—it reaches into the reader and makes an emotional connection that opens up and surpasses the story itself.

The place that bloomed in his mind was not much of a place, just an exchange of dialogue between two characters on the telephone:

> "Where are you?" he said.
> She said, "I'm home. I'm on the stairs, I just got in."

In the conversation, these were the lines that established the characters' relationship to each other. There was an intimacy in the answer "I'm on the stairs" that piqued the interest of the reader, showing something more than just the character's location. It makes me think of Hemingway's famous quote: "The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water" (154). Hemingway explains this line by suggesting that much of what a writer knows can be omitted from the story: "If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them" (Hemingway 154). I was surprised to recognize that my two lines of dialogue were doing what Hemingway describes here—I was suggesting the depths of the relationship between the characters in a way that captured the imagination of the reader.

It was a great revelation to recognize that what was important here was not the story I had forced upon these people, but the people themselves and how they related to each other. The story, in many ways, was simply a vehicle for this glimpse of the relationship—that is what was interesting—and to make the story better the reader

needed to see more glimpses like that. But it is important that they are simply glimpses. Pages of explanation about the relationship are not interesting. And, as Hemingway must have known, that is not interesting in part because it is not real. Relationships—who one is when he is with a particular person, the connection between one person and another, what people mean to each other—are not visible to the naked eye: in real life or in fiction. The skeleton of our connections never shows. It is always the part of the ice-berg that is under the water. That is why what we do and say is so important, because everything else, the other seven-eighths, can never really show itself. We know it is there, but all we have is the suggestion of it, and that suggestion comes through the little piece visible—the action, the dialogue, the drama, the story. That little piece is interesting in stories because it gives us something to imagine, a thread we can connect to ourselves and our own experiences. But the reason these little pieces really affect us is slightly different: we care about these glimpses because they suggest all the things we can never get a hold of.

My colleague helped me see that my stories are about relationships and, more particularly, they are about the main character's reaction to her relationships. My colleague also helped me recognize that it is okay to write stories about the inner lives of characters. As I have tried to explain earlier in this essay, the recognition and acceptance of what I was naturally inclined to do was a huge part of my learning process as a fiction writer. I think that learning to follow this natural inclination, just as Fitzgerald learned "fidelity to his own responses," also allows me to put faith in the stories themselves. There were certainly moments in Andrea's story when I did not know why she needed to see her brother or what was going to happen when she did she him, but by following the

story as closely as I could, it eventually became clear to me. It seems to me that a writer has to do what the story requires of him. And in my experience, doing what the story requires trumps most of what people tell you about writing. You have to figure out what works best for the story and then do it as best as you can.

Following the story makes everything seems a bit more like real life. Hemingway also makes a distinction between creating characters and creating people. His distinction is helpful to me. It helps me understand why writing stories about the inner life of characters might be interesting or important. In real life, we can never see more than glimpses of our relationships and furthermore we can never see more than glimpses of ourselves. To make the characters in stories as real as possible, we have to make these characters function in the same way people function. People are complicated, but all we can know of a particular person is our own experience of them. We cannot know them at a million different times. I would also argue that this is true of our own selves.

We cannot see all the pieces of who we are, at least not all together, all at once. Hemingway's method of knowledge and omission is a way to explain how people are created in fiction because it is also a way to explain how people are in the world. We try to know as much as we can about ourselves and other people, but most of the ice-berg is under the water. The best we can do is develop, as Hemingway says, "a feeling of those things."

I think this notion of catching ourselves in glimpses has a lot to do with Flannery O'Connor's argument (which is surely made by many others also) that fiction must be primarily concerned with the senses: "The beginning of human knowledge is through the senses, and the fiction writer begins where human perception begins." As people, we are

confined to two basic modes of knowledge: sensory knowledge and things we learn from other people. Of course, without sensory knowledge we cannot access the knowledge that other people make available to us. So, unless the rest of you have access to a store of a priori knowledge that I am not privy to, all we have to go on is what we see and hear and feel and smell and taste: we are limited to our own experience of the world. Because we are limited in this way, it makes sense that only the tip of the ice-berg can be visible. We cannot know exactly what other people are thinking. We cannot know exactly what it is like to live someone else's life. I do not think we can even fully know what it is like to live our own lives. And yet, it seems that is all we have to go on. We must use our own experience to understand that very experience as well as the experience of others, to create some sort of relationship with them and with ourselves.

This is difficult, in life and in fiction. In life, we have to be able to put all of our experiences together and make sense of them and act on them. In writing fiction, we have to be able to put all of our experiences together and use them to imagine the experiences of the people we are thinking up. We have to develop knowledge of these people's experiences and then boil those experiences down to what would be visible in real life. And what would be visible in real life are not ideas or beliefs, but noses and shoes and parties on boats, girls staring at diving boards and people talking on the telephone—the things that are the tip of the ice-berg. I think O'Connor is right to call this process "heavy labor," but I still think it is easier than actually living. In fiction there is less risk. After all, in fiction, if you mess it up, you can delete it.

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CHRISTMASTIME

I.

The two of them have known each other for a decade. It is impossible for the character to believe, and by the end of the play, it shows on her face: a decade. And not just any decade—a decade at the beginning, when a decade is a long time. At the beginning, they are young people, in school. He throws a party for her on her nineteenth birthday, and, though she is polite, she thinks him ridiculous. Who throws a party for someone he doesn't even know? He kisses her, in the middle of everything, center stage, and she dumps a cup of ice over him, real ice that has all but melted waiting for the show to go on. He splashes half a glass of champagne at her then, carefully almost, as if this is a game. It trickles down her arm, slides over the skin beneath her dress, though this is something the actress struggles to show the audience. She tries, she shivers visibly, looks around, and retaliates, pressing a plate full of birthday cake into the center of his chest. The paper plate sticks to him for a moment before it falls.

In real life, it had been white cake with chocolate icing and Bret had smeared it across the side of Jonathon's face with one finger, but that seemed vulgar to her now, the emotions behind it much too complicated for the stage. It seemed then that he had picked her at random, out of a lineup somewhere. That he had shown up arbitrarily in love, expecting her to catch up. She remembered being furious and, nevertheless, overcome with the desire to touch him.

Later on, the actress must turn to the audience and narrate the scene conjured up like a memory at one corner of the stage. She must tell them, straight out, how she remembers their first meeting now, after a decade, after she's left him. How he looked in

that diner, alone and very strange. Too sad, slumped over a book, skin too tan, hair sticking up all over his head. He looked like he'd been through some horrible ordeal, like he'd been living in his car (he had been, she knew now), and yet he was dressed like someone on Wall Street. In real life, Jonathon had never dressed like that. It was one of the false details that kept catching in Bret's head while she was writing the play. He had always been more stylish than she had. For more than a decade now he'd been buying her beautiful things: old dresses, handmade sweaters, shoes with short spiked heels. Things that she loved.

The actress turns to the audience again and tells them more. She tells them the truth: at that moment in that strange diner ten years ago, she had not thought much of him. She had been more taken with the starched white table cloths on every table, how the saucers left incomplete circles of pale brown, how good it was to be so young. She has to tell them that ten years ago she thought this moment would simply vanish. That she had no idea how often she'd consider it, year after year, slipping in details that weren't even real. She would never have guessed how dear he would seem to her after it was all over—sitting there, ten years ago, too sad, slumped over a book.

*

In the mornings, late in the fall, when it had started to get cold already, Bret and Jonathon Linden lay in bed for a long time with the radio on. Even in the fall, the house was cold, everywhere was cold—everywhere except this bed and a packed theater, but it was best to be warm and naked at the same time. There was a high window in the walk-in closet and in the morning, light came through it, casting a square of wavering light on the wall beside their bed. In the fall, it was prettier, slightly orange and sometimes pink.

It was more necessary too; everything else was darker. This morning she said, "The door's closed."

"Don't get up." He turned his head toward the pillow and pressed it into his face. Then he raised his head again. "No," he stretched out the word, softly, adding faintly, "I'll do it."

He was lying, sort of. "Yes," she said, slipping away from his arms, climbing over him, out of bed. She opened the closet door and then came back, climbed back in.

"I have to meet Marilynn at ten," she said. Marilynn was her agent.

He propped his head up on his elbow. "Did you finish it?"

"Yeah, I think so." She looked at the light on the wall they had painted several years ago. It was the most terrifying thing she had ever written, because it seemed like it might actually be good, but also because it was mostly autobiographical, because it commented on the future in a way that she did not mean to be autobiographical at all. Finishing the last pages, her hands shook.

"It is good?"

"Well, if you read it maybe you'd know." It wasn't fair to say, she had never asked him to, she had never offered to let him.

He sat up. "If you want me to read it, I'll read it. I'd like to read it. I don't know how many times I've said that. But then you say, 'oh no comments, don't tell me what you think, just tell me if I'm crazy.'" He leaned over to turn off the radio and instead knocked his watch off the nightstand.

She sat up then and waited, watching him lean over the edge of the bed to pick it up. She liked to see him when she talked to him, to see the reaction that flashed over his face, the way his eyes changed. "What can you say? You have to say you like it."

"No, actually, I don't." He tipped his head toward her, almost smirking, almost winking at her.

She pressed her hand over one side of his face, covering one of his eyes, half of his lips. "But you will. It's like asking, 'Do I look fat?'"

"Don't be silly," he said, taking her hand away, holding it.

She gave him a stern look.

"I'm not supposed to say that though, am I?" He took her hand, still in his, and ran it across his throat like a slash. The skin on his neck was warmer than his hands.

She laughed. "See, it's all a trap." She fell back on the bed and he sat up, watching her.

"I have to meet Marilynn at ten," she said again. She got out of bed, watching him now, wishing he wasn't making that face. "Anyway, you read like a director," she said.

He smiled. She knew he couldn't help it. He had wanted to be a director as long as she'd known him and, now that he actually was one, he couldn't quite believe it. It was a feeling she was beginning to understand—she had always wanted to be this.

*

Marilynn was fond of the café outside Nordstrom's in the mall on Michigan Ave. This was partly because they made her eggnog lattes all year long, but it also had something to do with not having an office of her own. Marilynn assured Bret that

actually she *did* have an office, she just didn't want anyone else to see it. "I'd have to clean," Marilynn said, offering her a pill from a little silver box. Bret declined. "Besides," Marilynn went on, "I like knowing that people can't find me without telling me about it beforehand." She looked at Bret and laughed, giving her a little shove on the shoulder.

Bret smiled. Marilynn was infamous, the best agent in town and not an agent at all. She was a wealthy Chicago lady who liked plays, who liked working her old connections.

"What have you got?"

Bret handed her the play.

"Christ, this is long. What did we talk about last time, people want to be out in time for a real dinner? Restaurants close early in this town, you can't forget that."

Bret nodded. "I know," she said.

"Well, don't you?"

Bret nodded again.

"All right. Let me see this," Marilynn put on the glasses that hung from a looped string around her neck. She opened the play and started reading, out loud, but under her breath and very quickly.

Bret watched her. Her mouth moved like she was speaking a frightening language, some private language that proved you were alone in the world. It was no different than the muttering of the homeless ladies around them, who seemed to occupy every other table in the café. They set their bags and packages on the chairs at the tables, as if these were the only company they expected. "Honestly," she heard a woman

wearing a pink stocking cap say, “I don’t know how much more the floors of this town can hold.” When Marilynn finished the second page, Bret saw her slow down and sit back in her chair, propping the folder up on her stomach as she read. The way she was sitting, her eyes looked barely open and Bret watched her golden eyelashes move now and then, efficiently, like someone had pressed the button on a camera. That was how Bret knew she wasn’t asleep.

“A love story, huh?” Marilynn said forty minutes later, when she was finished reading.

Bret turned to look at her. She had been watching a woman across the mall staring into a shop window that displayed a plain-looking, cream-colored dress. The woman kept leaning into the window and Bret couldn’t tell if she was looking at the dress itself or her own reflection or something else. Maybe a cat sleeping on the display, Bret thought. Now she made a face at Marilynn and shrugged.

Marilynn smiled, tight lipped, and Bret felt like a child who had done an odd thing, one that the adults didn’t know what to do with. “Will it upset him?” she asked.

“Why should it upset him? It’s a play.”

Marilynn looked at her and nodded, her eyelashes clicking together several times in a row. She took out the silver box again and set it out on the table. “Okay, well listen. It’s the best thing I’ve read in a long time. And you sure fooled me because I didn’t think you were any good at this. Before.” She opened the box and took out another pill, held it out to Bret, and when Bret shook her head, tossed it into her barely opened mouth. “Do you have a cigarette?” she asked. “Normally I don’t smoke but today it doesn’t seem like such a bad idea.”

They stood outside Nordstrom's on Michigan for a long time, smoking and watching all the people go by. In Chicago people sort of stomped along, but the fall made them seem light and quick, catching a stray electric charge from the changing season. There were lots of people in suits going between office buildings. "That one's cute," Marilynn said once about a man in a black pinstripe. "He's got droll eyes," she said.

"What does that mean, Marilynn?"

"Hell if I know," she said after a while. "He looked different than the others, maybe he's got make-up on."

Bret looked at her.

"Well, sometimes they do," she said. "You know this."

At noon she walked over to Wacker and down Randolph, turning onto North Dearborn where Jonathon was rehearsing. Today was a day where he worked alone with the leads, trying to get them to do it all his way and think it was their idea. That's what directors did, so far as she understood it. Manipulation was the technical skill involved, actors like paints that you dabbed on where you wanted them, actors like words you chose in a quiet room. It was a good job for him, she often thought, fighting with him or having sex with him or watching him work the room at a party. He was manipulative, sure, but he also understood people and what they wanted. To be loved, to be free and safe and hungry. It was mostly simple.

She walked through the lobby, into the theater. Jonathon was standing on the stage, his brown arms folded across his chest. Every once in a while he shifted his weight from one foot to another and then, suddenly, he threw up his hands. "Where is it?

It's here someplace, things don't just *disappear*." He started up-ending things on the stage. There was a chest of drawers and he pulled each drawer out and turned it over, dumping the contents onto the floor. She recognized the exercise, he talked about it all the time—the moment when theater had really made sense to him. You were supposed to act as though you were looking for a ring you'd lost, a very important ring—your wedding ring, say. You had to search for it, in a real way, in a convincing way. Of course the trick was to really search, to believe that you'd truly lost the ring. Not to believe that the character you were playing had lost it, but that you, yourself in your body in your life, had lost it. Putting yourself in a different body, in a different life, that happened later on.

He tore the stage apart, overturning everything until the whole set was covered in piles of junk. Prop newspapers taken apart sheet from sheet, clothes, the hangers they had been on, all the pockets turned inside out. It reminded Bret of the time she'd left both of their passports in the copy machine at a Kinko's in Lincoln Park. He'd trashed the apartment looking for them and about halfway through the trashing, she'd remembered. She saw that a tossed book had landed, along with a pencil, inside a colander on the kitchen floor and decided it would be better just to slip out. She drove to Kinko's thinking that she was going to have a heart attack or an aneurysm, that she should just drive herself to the ER. He would be slow to forgive her for being so careless, that was the point. The people at Kinko's had held onto them and when she brought them home, safe and sound, he told her that the passports themselves were not the point. She had actually cried—that part she'd forgotten—and left, went to Lynnie

and Bob's. When she came home the apartment was cleaner than before his outburst, but that wasn't saying much.

Now, he had the ring. Holding it up, he turned to the actors watching him and said, "See, do what you would really do." He looked at each of them individually and then turned to the empty seats, holding the ring up for the invisible audience to see. They all laughed and he bowed, making a joke of himself and how seriously he had taken all of it. He saw her, sitting in the back, and lost whatever point he was trying to make to them. "It's lunch time, isn't it?" he asked, looking at them again, almost sheepish. He put his hands in his pockets then. She walked down the aisle to meet him.

"Hey, Bret," one of the actors called.

"Hey," she said, waving. She couldn't remember his name.

Jonathon sat down on the edge of the stage. "How was the mall?"

"Ha," she said and slapped his thigh. "It was good. Very good."

"Awesome," he said in a real way, actually meaning it. "She's going to send it around?"

"Yeah and do whatever it is she does, hand out her little pills. In about nine months, maybe we'll know something."

He laughed. "Oh sooner than that," he said. "Seven and a half, maybe."

They walked down the street for lunch. The wind had picked up and dead leaves were blowing straight at them, scraping against their faces and sticking to their jackets. A taxi driver noticed this and drove along beside them, slowly, trying to be tempting. Bret looked at the driver finally and, waving him on, shouted, "We think it's fun."

When the car drove away, Jonathon said, “Well, I’ll have to read this play now, before I’m the only one who hasn’t.”

She shook her head. “Oh, please.”

“I do though. I don’t even know what it’s about.”

“Oh, you know,” she said, looking at him and then away, down the long line of parked cars beside them. “The usual kind of thing. I need to print out another copy though. Marilynn has my only one.”

At the corner, he looked at her. “You don’t want me to read it, do you?”

She stepped away from him. “Listen, you need to stop it already. We’ve been playing this game all day.”

He turned away, shook his head at the garbage can beside the lamp post. “What game is that?”

She didn’t answer him.

During lunch Marilynn called. The Steppenwolf people wanted it.

“But, big surprise here, there’s a catch,” Marilynn said, her voice sounding old over the cell phone, on speaker now so they both could listen.

“What?” They actually said it together.

“They want to start working on it now. They planned a weird season and they’re regretting it. They want something now.”

Bret looked out the window. The street was so gray and plain. The only brightness was a white sheet of paper, full and smooth, blowing along the sidewalk. It was all bad news, she knew that. Jonathon said, “How long for production?”

She looked at him. She wouldn’t have thought to ask it.

"Six weeks," Marilynn said.

Jonathon nodded and looked at her. He made this face, bottom lip over the top, cheeks sucked in a little.

"Union?" he asked now.

"It's the Steppenwolf, give me a break. And she's the playwright, who cares? It doesn't matter to her." That meant yes, they could only hire union actors and production crews.

"True, that's true," he said to Marilynn. Then he whispered, "It's great."

His eyes were so dark it was hard to make out the pupil from the iris. She touched the side of his face, the place where his nose slopped into the side of his cheekbone. "It is great," she said and then louder to Marilynn, "Let's do it then."

"Good," she said. "Good. I need you to come over here right now."

"Where's here?" Bret asked. Jonathon started to laughed at the question, at the thought of her office in the mall. She put her hand over his mouth.

"You know where," Marilynn said.

Bret agreed to be there in fifteen minutes. Jonathon asked the waitress to put Bret's lunch in a Styrofoam box and before she left the restaurant, she kissed him goodbye.

*

In the morning, three days later, Jonathon left early for a meeting and Bret stayed in bed. She read the play again and decided it would be okay; she decided she would show it to him when he got home. But before he got home, he called saying the meeting had been a disaster. He had fought with the artistic director at the Goodman. She could

hear how upset he was, he was practically out of breath. "Peter Falls," Jonathon said. "The most powerful man in Chicago theater and I called him a prick." The next day it was the same kind of thing. His mother called saying that her younger brother had died. Bret had never even met this uncle and Jonathon only ever called him, 'my mother's youngest brother,' but it was still a funeral, something out of the ordinary, a reminder that life isn't normal.

In the car on the way to Milwaukee they talked about him. It was the easiest way to avoid talking about anything else. "He laughed at me once when I was a little kid," he told her. "I puked on my plate during lunch, at my grandmother's. And he thought it was hilarious. Looking back on it he was high, I'm sure of it, but I didn't know that then. Then, I was humiliated."

"Were you sick?" she asked him.

"No," he said and then he squinted. "I don't know, maybe."

"That's so mean," she said. She looked out the window at the farmland. Maybe she would have laughed too, at a kid suddenly vomiting for no reason at all. When they drove to Milwaukee they took the county highways, two lane roads that were just thin ruts under the low dome of gray sky. The rows of tilled soil came right up to the road and stretched out beyond it also. It was the best soil in the world, her father would say. He would kick at the ground with his foot and say, 'look how black.' You could see a long way out here, in the winter, and Bret had always noticed that it felt like being in the desert, except sadder. Everything was dead and that's why you could see; everything was still because people were inside worrying about mortgaged land and the price of commodities. Her parents used to have a farm out here, a long time ago. Before she and

Jonathon were married, she showed him where it was and they walked around the edge of it.

In the pew at the funeral they stood really close to each other. She kept her arm around him the way she had when his father died and at his mother's afterward she stayed beside him, holding her empty paper plate, soggy from deviled eggs and vegetable dip. She watched him eat all the things she wouldn't touch: smoked whitefish, Swedish meatballs, those little hot dogs. He smiled at her as he took a bite and she made a face. He laughed so hard he almost spit out the food. Every once in a while she remembered she was hiding something.

A string of people came up to them. His cousin Elaine, his great uncle Martin, various children. His sister's husband, David, stayed beside them after a while, talking about his job in marketing. "If we have a kid, you know," he said, holding his hand out flat and lowering it down, "I would tell him, don't even consider something like this. It's just such a waste of time, what's the point, to further the consumer economy? They don't need *me* to do *that*."

"Quit," Jonathon said without pause. He sounded almost dismissive, as if David's problem wasn't really a problem at all. "Save up three months' salary and quit. Figure something else out."

"Easier said than done," David said, shaking his head. "My property taxes, at least the ones in Kenosha, have gone up thirty percent in the last three years. I mean, I'm all for civic responsibility, but this isn't the old Swedish homeland."

Jonathon nodded and Bret laughed helpfully.

"Anyway," he said. He put his hands in his pockets then and turned toward them, facing them more directly. "What are you guys up to?"

Bret looked at Jonathon. She didn't know how he'd answer this question in his mother's house. She watched him pause and then smile and start talking about the play he was working on now, but he didn't mention that it was the last thing he had lined up until the spring. Yesterday he had lost his contract with the Goodman Theater because he refused to direct *A Christmas Carol*. Apparently, *that's* when he had called Peter Falls a prick. He had done the play two years in a row already and he thought it was beneath him now, she knew that. It was also that, still, like some kind of teenager, he refused to do what he didn't want to. She didn't know how he figured these luxurious choices possible and she knew people like David wouldn't understand it either. Now was not the time to say something about it, though, not with this new secret of her own, her own mistake. She would not remind him how he'd lost the chance to do another play, a new play, at the Goodman. A chance that could have gotten him to Broadway.

Jonathon stopped talking and turned to Bret. He tipped his head toward her. "Bret's got a new play coming out, actually. An excellent play. It was snapped up by one of the best companies, really *the* best company in Chicago."

"Really? Which company?" David asked, turning to her.

"The Steppenwolf," she said.

"*Really*. That's fantastic." He nodded at her and smiled. "Wow."

"Thanks," she said. She looked away and then down at her plate. The soggy spots had dried and now they looked like grease stains.

"Wow," he said again. "What's it about?"

Bret shrugged. "You know—typical for me, sad people fighting."

He nodded, very serious. "Cool," he said, continuing to nod. "Very cool."

"It's the best thing I've read all year," Jonathon said.

She looked at him and he smiled at her, his face a little red. The whole thing was even worse than she'd thought.

II.

After Jonathon read the play, he wouldn't look at her, not right in the eye. They would sit in bed at night, in the dark, and have long conversations about that birthday party, about the weird diner on Colonial Avenue. He would say things like, "So you didn't love me at all?" And she would give the same answer every time, the answer that seemed better than a simple 'no,' which didn't even seem true, not anymore. She would say, "I do now." But that didn't seem to matter to him. "Isn't that enough for you?" she would ask him then. And he would start apologizing, instead of giving the answer that might have been true: no, that wasn't enough. Instead he would say, "Maybe it shouldn't bother me, but it does. I don't want to feel this way, but I do." "All right then," she would say. "You have to feel what you feel." After those conversations things would improve for a few days, but any problem brought it all back up. And then they would both say what they could, all over again.

When the lights came up on the last night of tech rehearsals, Jonathon turned to her, his face white. He gave her this look she had never seen before and, after he walked out of the theater, she stayed in her seat for a long time. When she found him later, talking to the man vacuuming the lobby, he acted as if everything was fine. "Well done," he said and then they walked home in silence.

It was not an easy play to pull off, but, apparently, Bret had done it. Most of the reviewers called it stunning. The ones who didn't call it stunning called it sentimental and pointless, a criticism she was inclined to accept—what wasn't sentimental and pointless, in the end? As far as she was concerned, the more she saw the play, the more she hated it. The characterization was thin. The dialogue, trite. The sentiment behind the whole thing, false and unkind, lacking generosity and depth of imagination. The diner conjured up on the stage was nothing like the memories she had in her own mind. The square tables with white table cloths, the creaking chairs, the stacks of books leaning against the wall, the couple who ran the place, both of them always on the lookout for college girls to sleep with. Who they'd been back then, the birthday party, the people they'd known, the town outside Baltimore where they'd lived. None of it was rendered as real as it was, as beautiful as it had been, as beautiful as she remembered it now.

*

The play they saw tonight turned out to be a Christmas play after all. Minutes into the first act the detail began to accumulate undeniably: snow drifts beside the fake backdoor, the mention of Jello salad, a garland around the banister. When one of the characters shouted, "I'm fucking sick of Christmas," Bret and Jonathon looked at each other. He winced, squeezing his eyes shut, gritting his teeth, as if there were some terrible pain. She laughed at him, two loud cackles before she caught herself and he turned away, disgusted. Such inappropriate laughter would once have made him smile—a helpless, happy smile—but not now. Not anymore.

She looked around the dark theater. It was warm and most people had their coats with them at their seats, in their laps or tucked around them. The stage light was

reflected in all the open faces and she could see them reacting naturally, thinking no one was watching. A woman in front of them was biting the shoulder of the man sitting next to her. Bret turned away and looked back again. Yes, she really was. Bret looked at Jonathon because this was the sort of thing he would want to see, the sort of thing they would have laughed at. But, of course, he wouldn't look at her; he only shifted in his seat, her staring making him uncomfortable. He was paying attention like it was his play, like he was in it. Bret looked back at the stage. The actors had to raise their voices; they had been taught how to do it and still sound normal, but it didn't really work. They had been taught how to stand properly. Once she had learned it too and when she looked at the actors down there now she hated it. They all looked like they were standing on diving boards, ready to bolt, and she was tired of watching them pretend like they were real.

At the intermission, they didn't say anything; it wasn't necessary. They filed out of their seats and moved to the coat check, quickly. She handed him the little tickets and he helped her with her coat, carefully though, so that it didn't make her feel like it used to, so that now she felt like a child. But stepping outside felt like stepping out onto the deck of an ocean liner, made you feel you had some old life that cut across time, a life that knew the whole world. The streets were wet from melted snow and they glistened in the early dark, they flickered with the traffic. This was what she loved, the cold city, the people swarming inside the lobby behind them. He loved it too. It was part of the deal between them and, standing in the light under the awnings, they looked at each other for a moment before turning out to face the street. "What's with all these damn plays about Christmas?" he said. They had been to the theater every night this week, but they hadn't

been able to avoid the Christmas plays they had agreed not to see. This year they had agreed: no Christmas.

"The marketing people probably got ahold of them and did their own revisions," she said.

"Yeah." He lit her cigarette and turned back to the street. "Just add a *little* Christmas." He smiled after he said it.

She smiled too. "Well, you know," she said, making a face. "A *little* Christmas never hurt anything." For the last two weeks they had been together constantly, but they didn't talk about any of it, not her play, not his career, nothing. They talked about the wet streets and the dirty snow and the light under the awnings. Her play had been a great success, but it was closed now, thank God, and neither one of them had anything else to do. It was pretty quiet at Christmastime, if you had agreed no Christmas.

One of the glass doors behind them opened and she turned around. It was Bob and Lynnie.

"See, I told you," Lynnie said, looking over her shoulder at Bob as she came through the door. "They're *always* out here." Lynnie was wearing a yellow dress under a white fake fur coat. She had her arms folded around her to keep the coat closed. When the coat fell open, you could see that it was a sundress, thin straps, bare shoulders, the middle of winter.

Bob shook his head. "I never said they wouldn't be. Jesus."

Lynnie looked up at Bob with her eyes pinched and he smiled at her.

"Ass," she said very softly and immediately she looked over at Bret and Jonathon, to see if they'd heard her. She said, "What's up, you guys? You're, like, in hiding."

Bret looked at Jonathon, just a glance, but she caught his eye and he almost smiled at her, she knew it. "Not much," she said.

Bob shook Jonathon's hand and stood beside Bret. "Hi punk," he said. "How's it going?"

Bret looked up at him. He was very tall and sometimes she felt like she misunderstood him, misinterpreted his facial expressions because his face was so far away. That was one way she tried to explain Bob, because on his own, she didn't get him: he didn't seem to like anyone. "Just fine, Bob," she said. "How are you?"

"Oh you know, can't complain," he said. He wasn't wearing a top coat and now he put his hands in his pants pockets.

She almost said, well good for you, Bob, but then she looked at him. His eyes were red like he was very tired. She only nodded and turned to Jonathon.

"What's up with the Christmas plays?" Jonathon said, as if taking her cue. He looked at Bob. "Everything we see is some covert holiday extravaganza. Nothing's *about* Christmas, but everything's full of Christmas *things*."

Bob and Lynnie laughed. "I know," she said. "It's like, give it a goddamned rest already." She was acting in *A Christmas Carol* and she had told Bret at least three times that she didn't blame Jonathon for saying no.

Bob looked at Lynnie again, like he didn't approve. "Got to fill the seats," he said. "It's a reality."

Everybody nodded in silence.

Jonathon turned to Bob. "So, how is it over there? How's Falls?" Bob worked in the casting department at the Goodman.

The two of them started talking and Lynnie moved next to Bret. She touched her arm. "I haven't seen you in *forever*," she said.

"I know," Bret said, leaning toward her. "Not in a long time." Not since the opening of her play, over a month ago.

"I liked the play," she said, whispering. The two of them stepped closer to the street. "I never got to tell you, I saw it three times. Seriously, I've never watched a play three times, not unless Bob was in it and I had to."

Bret smiled. "Thanks." She looked out at the street. Clumps of snow fell off the bare trees on the other side. It was warm, at least for December in Chicago. "It wasn't worth it though. I don't know what I was thinking."

"Oh, please," Lynnie said even lower. "He can get over it."

Bret looked at the street again. A block up you could see the stoplights reflected on the wet pavement. They melted from red to green and a car squealed. Everyone turned to look at the sound. She wondered what Lynnie meant exactly, how much she knew. Some people thought she had slept with the director—they noticed the trouble between her and Jonathon and made up reasons why. They said stuff like, 'Directors are all the same somehow, if she likes one, she'll like them all.' They were stupid. She hadn't done anything like that, though she knew things would have been different if she had; they would have been better, easier to deal with. That would have made him angry, better than numbing him out completely. What if he couldn't get over it? You couldn't blame him, not exactly.

The wind seemed to pick up then. She tossed her cigarette into the gutter, making the orange glow deepen against the wet black and hiss out all at once. She looked over at

Jonathon. His head was bent forward a little like he was really listening. Bob was doing all the talking. "This is a long intermission," she said.

"Totally," Lynnie said. Her coat was hanging open again. "I like your shoes."

What shoes? She looked down. Jonathon had bought them once when he was in New York City. There was a time she thought his shopping so strange, but then, after a while, she understood. "Sure," she said. The lights above them flickered.

"You two should come over tonight," Bob said as they all went back inside. "It's just a few people, no big deal. We don't have to say anything about Christmas."

"*Yes*," Lynnie said. "Or I'll die of being bored."

"We'd love to," Jonathon said and Bret nodded, not looking at him now. They went to recheck their coats.

*

In the second act, it was Christmas again. A whole year had passed, a year that changed everything. The son was lost in a war his parents had not supported; they had rolled their eyes and said, "Don't waste your life." They'd never imagined that he might actually die. The grandfather lost his mind and moved into a nursing home without telling his family. He didn't want to see them anymore. So, all alone, the parents tried to forget about Christmas. They went on a cruise and leaned over the deck rail, throwing papaya seeds into the ocean. Papaya seeds always reminded Bret of caviar and caviar made her think of her father. He ate it for breakfast sometimes, like a real Russian. She thought about him, about her mother, about how nobody was careful enough, and by the end of the play she was crying.

When the house lights came up, she watched the people come back to life. They blinked at the glare and turned to their companions for some sort of reaction, exchanging looks with raised eyebrows or real smiles. Then they stood up, clutching their programs and their coats. They all filed out to the lobby, getting animated as they went, turning around to laugh with the strangers behind them. Jonathon didn't stand up. She looked at him. He had been crying too and they both sat there with wet faces until almost everyone else was gone. She looked at him again, but he didn't turn to face her. "Jon," she said.

He turned now, open eyed, and she reached out her hand, stretched the tips of her fingers toward his cheek. He stood up just before she touched him. The seat creaked when it folded up. He stood there, with one hand on the seat in front of him, looking down at her.

"Don't walk out," she said. She was still holding out her hand.

He looked at her and then snapped his head back, like a wave of frustration had suddenly gone through him, a chill coming up along the spine. "Excuse me," he said and his legs brushed against her knees when he pushed past her. His footsteps were loud, reverberating somehow, even on the carpet. The sound faded out and after a couple of moments so silent she thought could hear her blood moving, the door thumped when it stopped swinging. That was it then. How many times were they going to do this? She looked up at the ceiling. The house lights dimmed again and the curtain slid open, silent, like it was tracing the motion of something invisible. The stage crew carried off the fifth act set and brought the set piece of the first act back out. Being on the stage crew would be nice. Pleasant and uncomplicated. Except people probably treated you weird, like

you weren't important. Two of the actors, the leads, walked onto the stage in their street clothes and started talking in normal voices. She could hear what they said.

"What line?"

"Um… you know, 'so that's what this is about. I guess I should have known.'"

"What about it?" he asked her, putting his hands on his hips. He tipped his head like he was thinking about it. "You could say it louder. It's an angry line, right?"

The woman looked at him and shook her head. "*Seriously*? You're missing the whole point."

He laughed a little. "Probably so."

She started swaying, shifting her weight from side to side, and Bret imagined she was tired of standing up. That's the thing she remembered most about acting. All that standing up, all that waiting around with nowhere to sit. "All I know is right there it doesn't work," the woman said. She folded her arms across her waist.

"Well, what if he doesn't answer her when she says that? What if they just start waltzing?"

Now she laughed. "Waltzing?"

He nodded. "Awkwardly at first." He held his hand out to her.

Real smooth, Bret wanted to say, under her breath, but she only stood up. She did not want to see them waltz. She eased the seat closed so it wouldn't creak, but she didn't look up to see if they noticed her. She was tired of this business anyway. She would leave, get out of this town where everyone knew them together. She would write articles or movies, teach theater at a community college. She would learn how to sail and live on a boat or in a very small house. If she lived in a house, she could get a dog. A Great

Dane or something. Walking up this aisle in the dark felt good, that was the truth, the way the carpet gave under your feet, that was the problem. She didn't want a dog. She had never wanted one. This was what she wanted.

She pushed through the swinging door with both hands, held out flat, and the first thing she saw was Jonathon standing in the lobby, leaning against the main doors. The dark street was behind him, the wet light of the pavement and the reflections of the lobby in the glass. He regarded her calmly, with the mild interest of a stranger being approached by another stranger; here he was the person who mattered more to her than anyone else. He had said that to her once, almost a decade ago, she remembered the exact words, "You don't understand how much you matter to me." She hadn't even understood what it meant for something to matter.

The last people were hanging around in small groups, talking in soft voices cut by laughter. She kept walking straight toward him. "Leave then," she said, loud. All the people turned and then quickly turned back. "What are you doing here? If you're so mad at me, why don't you fucking go?"

"You have the ticket for my coat," he said.

She stared at him.

He shrugged. "It's cold outside," he said. "I need my coat."

She walked right past him, through the doors. It *was* cold outside, it had gotten colder. The street was quiet and still, the way it only was in winter. You could hear water falling off the trees across the street. She started running and before she hit the corner she heard him calling to her. She stopped then and took her shoes off. She couldn't run fast in these stupid heels; she left them on the sidewalk where they belonged.

She kept running barefoot across the intersection, passed the dark store fronts with letters painted directly on the glass. She ran down a whole block of sidewalk covered entirely by awnings, one awning stretching out to meet the next. Only at the cross street could you look up and see the sky. It was covered too, in a thick layer of gray cloud.

He caught her at the curb, where she had stopped to look up. He put his arms around her, her shoes in his hands, and held her.

She couldn't tell if he was just trying to keep her from running farther away or if he actually wanted to hold her now. When he let go he said, "Put your shoes on," and dropped them on the ground between them.

LAKE RESORT

Lane had met Paul at the resort she owned. She didn't even like to say she owned it. When guests first met her they were often surprised; sometimes they mistook her for hired help, as if she had any of that. Lane didn't know what it was about her that made her seem so out of place here, maybe she seemed too young to be tied down in such an elaborate way. When she told them who she was they would say, "*Oh*, you're the *owner*," and turn red or laugh. "My sister and I," she would answer or sometimes, "I'm not the owner, I'm just the one who pays." But Paul hadn't said anything like that. He had only said, "God, you have the most gorgeous place," and stopped to take his shoes off as they walked across the grass. One of his socks had a hole in it, a huge hole right at the big toe. He must have forgotten the hole had ever existed because he seemed genuinely surprised to see it there. "Oh," he said and then he looked up at her, "there's my toe." He lifted his foot to show her. She laughed and said, "I hate that," but she also thought he was a bit ridiculous.

Maybe it was the place he had fallen in love with. Maybe she had fallen in love with him because he loved the place as much as she did. On the night he arrived, she walked out to the dock farthest from her house, at the end of the row of cottages, just past the cedar trees. She always went to that dock, its view was the best, the most complete. It was also the dock least likely to be visited by guests. She walked out to the end and sat down on the edge of it, her legs dangling just above the water. The water was smooth and silent and sitting on that dock felt like being suspended above the end of the earth. It felt like being connected to enormity itself. She could imagine what it was like when nobody lived here, when nobody lived anywhere.

The sky was full of stars and the longer you looked up at it, the more you saw. There was the Milky Way, there was Orion, there was one she didn't know the name of. She sat at the end of the dock until she got cold and then she stood up and moved a little closer to the shore. When she turned around, she saw him sitting in an Adirondack chair at the edge of the water. He had a glass in his hand. She nodded at him and he nodded back, but that was all. She had no idea how long he had been there. She wondered if he had been there when she walked out in the beginning. Now she tried to ignore him though she knew it would be impossible. The only thing to do was wait a few minutes, so he wouldn't think she was leaving because she'd seen him, and go inside. She lay down on her back in the middle of the dock, just as she would have if he hadn't been there. She looked up at the stars and after a while she knew that he was gone; she didn't feel his presence intruding. She stayed out on the dock until she got too cold to stand it because this was the sort of thing she found difficult to step away from; it felt like a waste. When she stood up she saw that he was still there and she walked down the dock quickly, not even pausing to say hello, only whispering hello as she went by. "Evening," he whispered back. Not 'Beautiful, isn't it?' Not 'You're up late.' Not 'Aren't you cold?' Nothing like that at all, thank goodness. When she got back home she had an intense desire to turn around, but she didn't.

He seemed to want to spend his entire vacation helping her with the work. He would appear from time to time and start doing whatever she was doing, striking up some tiny conversation. "Do you ever order those big bags of ladybugs?" he asked once. Yes she did. She loved them. She would open the bag and stick her hand in and let the bugs crawl all over it while her sister, Elsa, looked on shrieking. When she told him that, he

said, “Gross.” It didn’t seem so strange when he helped her fix a dock that was starting to drift, but when he was cleaning toilets and scrubbing floors she felt a little funny. She said, “You know, this isn’t a Siberian resort.” He had laughed. Paul had come back three times that summer. He stayed two weeks in the fall. In the winter when things were slow at the resort, she visited him in St. Louis. Eventually he proposed, he quit his job as a research chemist, he came to stay. He stayed for ten years.

But, tonight, he said, “Do you ever think about something else?” He was lying on his side, behind her with his arm around her waist. The way he said it, she knew it was a question he didn’t mean to ask, it had just come out. It had been, in some way, unavoidable.

She didn’t wonder what he meant. She knew. He didn’t mean, do you ever wish you were sleeping with someone else or that you *were* someone else. He meant do you ever think about selling the place, do you ever wish you had a different life. “No,” she said because she didn’t. She never wished for a different life. She sat up and looked at him.

“No,” he said as she sat up. He lifted his head off the pillow and dropped it down again. “I was just asking.”

“Well, do you?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“What do you mean, yeah?”

He laughed. “I mean yeah. I don’t know. I guess I think it’s normal.”

“What’s normal?”

"That people don't always like their lives. It doesn't mean that any other life would actually be better."

"Sure, but why are you asking that now?"

"I don't know."

She sat up again and turned around to face him. "You do too. You don't like your life right now. Why not admit it?"

"And you're saying you never feel like that?" He leaned on his elbow and traced the pattern on the sheet. Thin straight lines. Pin stripes.

"I start to feel like that by the end of the summer and then the fall comes and everything changes. And then I get bored with the fall and then it's winter and everything's totally different again. Of course, I imagine other things, but, immediately and clearly, I know they're impossible."

"They're not impossible."

"Yes they are."

"That doesn't make any sense to me."

She lay down again, took his arm and wrapped it around her waist. "I don't know that I can explain it," she said and she almost felt like that was that.

The room was quiet but neither of them were sleeping. Sometimes you could hear a boat knocking against a dock. His arm started to feel heavy. She tried to think of what it was, why this would be on his mind now.

"This lab in Omaha offered me a grant," he said after a while.

That was why.

*

Almost fifteen years ago, Lane had bought the resort with her sister, Elsa. It was a wild thing to do. It was the sort of thing you did when the world was blaring around you, when everything seemed too real and impossible anyway and danger was familiar enough that you were tired of being afraid of it. Maybe some people would do drugs or cut off all their hair or go out dancing and bring home a stranger. Lane took out an enormous loan and bought a row of housekeeping cottages on 400 feet of lakeshore.

Lane had gotten married young, to some guy she had dated all through high school. Elsa was older, Elsa had warned her. But Elsa had still been there at the courthouse when they married. And she was there when it was all over four years later. "Well, that's that," Elsa had said when she picked Lane up. She was not being sarcastic, she was just stating the fact. Lane hadn't been able to say anything in response. She hadn't said anything for the last three days, she hadn't slept or taken off her sunglasses. Sometimes you could see to the bottom of things and then all you knew was that you were going to die, that the world was not what you thought and you were going to lose it anyway.

Elsa drove the car up to Wisconsin, all the way to the peninsula. She drove them along the entire length of it, the water right beside them the whole time. The water was sometimes green-blue, like the color of a tea cup Lane remembered from her grandmother's house. Sometimes it was gray, nearly black, shining, and sometimes it was so pale at the horizon you couldn't tell it from the sky. It was all those different colors in a matter of hours, depending on where the sun was and how thick the clouds. They started out in the morning when the sunlight was cool and when Elsa turned the car around to drive back down the coast, there was a giant harvest moon low in the sky. It

was luminous, orange at first and then yellow, then white. It seemed to follow over them like a living creature, like some cross between a spotlight and a stray dog. Lane kept looking up at it, thinking surely it understood this.

The thing she loved most about Elsa was that she hadn't said a word the whole time. They just drove. They did not even turn on the radio. Only occasionally would Elsa talk to other drivers. "Look, buddy, I'm over here," she would say. "See? And you're over there. Got it? You're going to stay there because I'm going to pass you." Lane had said something then, she had said, "Maybe that guy needs a boundaries workshop." Elsa had laughed. She believed in therapy. Lane had wanted to laugh too, but she really couldn't. She felt happy though, to make someone else laugh. It seemed like a long time since she had done it. When they got back down to the northern end of the peninsula, it was very dark and she felt better; somehow the two things were connected in her mind. Tonight she could sleep and when she woke up, everything would be restarted, some new everything.

When they got into the hotel room Elsa looked at Lane's face. She caught Lane right as she was coming out of the bathroom, the glasses off, the make-up washed away. She stood in front of Lane with her hands covering her mouth.

"You should see the other guy," Lane said after a moment.

Elsa shook her head.

"Don't do that," Lane said, stepping around her sister. "It's over now. Just laugh at my stupid joke."

"Goddamn you sometimes," Elsa said, turning around to look at her.

Lane got into bed. She said, "That's better."

They ate breakfast at an old candy store that had been turned into a fancy market for tourists. Then they walked straight out of town, past the golf course, and down a gravel road. As they walked Lane kept remembering that there was nothing left to worry about. Her job at the medical office, her husband, the friends she had known with him, they were all gone; it was all of them she had left and they were far, far away, already—as if they had never existed. It did not occur to her to worry about what she was going to do now.

The road was canopied by trees and brush and the only thing showing at the end was glimpses of water and sky. Once they passed a clearing, an old piece of farmland going back to being wild. The whole field was grass and trees just beginning to seem like trees, everything was yellow and green and straw except for a blooming rose bush growing right in the middle of things. Lane and Elsa stood there and looked at it until a horse fly found them and they got annoyed. They started running to try and escape it. Lane closed her eyes and really ran and when she opened them again Elsa wasn't beside her anymore. She had a flash of panic, a feeling of shame, as if her sister were a child and she had lost her in a big city. She turned to look back and Elsa was bent at the waist, her hands on her knees, looking at something on the ground. Lane jogged back to her, feeling the same wash of relief she had felt at least thirty times today already.

"It's a mood ring," Elsa said picking it up. She put it on her thumb and it turned blue immediately. "Huh," she said.

"Is that the good one or the bad one?"

"I don't remember. I always tried to get mine to the middle."

"To green," Lane said, remembering too.

"The best color." Elsa took the ring off her finger and blew on it. It turned black.

"Maybe it's broken," Lane said.

"Or I am," Elsa said and laughed at her own joke. She flapped her hand in the air and put the ring on again.

The closer they got to the end of the road, the more it looked like they were headed for a public beach, a boat launch or a pier. But when they reached the end they saw that they were wrong. The place appeared suddenly, at the abrupt ending of the trees and brush. You never would have known it was there at all. Seven white cottages with green shutters were lined up to face the lake and at the end of the line, closest the road, there was a white house, maybe twice the size of the largest cottage. It had a sign hanging from its porch; all it said was Lake Resort, in black capital letters. Whoever made that sign was not interested in fooling around. In front of the house, turned to face the road, was a for sale sign. Lane walked onto the grass and stepped past the sign. She looked out at the place. The lawn between the cottages and the water was broad and almost rolling. At other end of it was a large flower garden and behind that a small grove of old cedar trees growing ragged at the edge of the water.

Elsa didn't need much convincing. She had been talking for a while about starting a business with the money she'd gotten from her divorce settlement a few years ago. She was the one who dismissed Lane's fears about the price. "A million dollars isn't what it used to be," she said. It occurred to Lane then that her sister would be an excellent business person, good at marketing and judging the worth of things, at making people pay up. And this had turned out to be the truth. Elsa was good with the books, she was good with strategy. There was this part of her that always surprised Lane,

something about her that seemed like kindness, but was actually honesty and a sense of justice. Even when Lane was a teenager and Elsa was in college, Elsa would come home on breaks and harp on various philosophical topics. She would get off on a rant and say stuff like, "Nice and good aren't the same. Actually, the Greek etymology of 'nice' is foolish," and everyone around would look away and roll their eyes, trying not to giggle. Elsa and Lane's husband would get into arguments about this sort of thing. He would take the opposing stance no matter what the issue. He would say stuff like, "Society won't work if people aren't nice" or "Why do you always have to divide people into 'good' and 'bad?' That's so judgmental." It was strange to remember him. He had disappeared from her mind so completely that when he played an arbitrary role in some necessary memory, she was stunned to find him there at all. Oh, that's right, *him*, and then he would be gone again. He would be washed out by the green of the grass, the blue of the water.

The first couple of years at the resort were a blur. They painted signs for the gravel road and tacked up brochures at businesses in Bailey's Harbor. They redecorated the cottages and their own house. They bought croquet sets and beach balls and new lawn chairs. They became members of the Chamber of Commerce. They baked cookies for what few guests there were and drank Bloody Mary's with them on the beach. Every night they ate dinner sitting on the dock and most days they went out in a row boat. Elsa wanted to learn how to row and Lane was trying to teach her. "It's just a backwards circle, half in the air and half in the water."

Elsa tried it. Her concentration was immense. She looked like she was going to bite through her lip. "This is ridiculous," she said after a while, as the boat started turning in a slow circle, floating on the slight wake of a motor boat long gone.

"Haven't you ever used that machine at the gym?" Lane said.

"Yes," Elsa said. "That machine is nothing like this. This is ridiculous." The oars skimmed the water and splashed them both.

"Here," Lane said. "Stand up." Elsa stood up and almost tipped over the boat. She held on to Lane's arm. She clutched it. She held on to Lane's shoulder as Lane sat down in her place, leaning back, spreading her legs. "Okay, now you sit down here." She pointed to the bench in front of her.

"You're sitting there," Elsa said.

Lane scooted back a little farther. She touched the bench between her legs. "Right here."

Elsa sat down. "This hurts my butt," she said.

"It hurt my butt too, but do you want to learn to row or not? Hold the oars." Elsa took the oars and Lane put her hands over Elsa's hands. She started rowing.

"I feel like you're some creepy tennis instructor," Elsa said. "Remember that one guy. With the blue shorts, the little ones? With that horrible voice!"

"There you go," she said, trying to channel the voice of that tennis instructor. "That's it. Good girl. Yeah, right there."

"Okay, enough," Elsa said, she stood up, laughing. "Now I feel like you're trying to teach me how to masturbate."

"Jesus, Elsa," Lane said. She tried to pretend to be disgusted but she was laughing too hard. "I taught you how to do that a long time ago," she could barely get the words out.

Elsa cackled.

A voice called to them from the shore. It was strange how far, how loud everything carried. "Hello?" the voice said. Elsa jumped and almost tipped the boat again, she sat down in Lane's seat and Lane started rowing for the shore. It was Mr. Ramsey from number 7. You could see everything so clearly, you could read the logo on his t-shirt. Their weird little life was all there, looking like a post card. Except for Mr. Ramsey, who had started waving his arms. "We're coming," Elsa called. Her voice echoed. She put her hand over her mouth. "He probably heard all of our jokes," she whispered.

"They were *your* jokes," Lane whispered back.

Elsa made a face at her and then turned back to Mr. Ramsey. "What's the matter?" she yelled.

"My toilet's clogged," he yelled back.

"There's a plunger located directly under your sink," Elsa replied immediately.

"Oh," Mr. Ramsey said. His shoulders seemed to fall a little. "Okay." He stood looking at them for another moment and then called "Thanks," just before he turned away.

"They don't call them housekeeping cottages for nothing," Elsa said under her breath and Lane laughed so hard she had to stop rowing and float for a while.

Things went on like that, mostly good. There were bad times. Times when nobody came or, worse, times when everybody came and it rained all week. The guests seemed to hold you responsible for this or take it personally, as if you'd chosen that week specifically for them. The work was constant in the summer and the winters were slow and quiet—if you had the money you could have done whatever you wanted. But their taxes were more than their accountant had anticipated and they barely paid the bills those first two years. So they advertised more. They courted reviewers from all the guidebooks. They made a website. They sent Christmas cards to their guests from the summer before. Elsa insisted on handwriting them, adding a little message that said, "Hope to see you this summer!" Some of them actually came back.

But everything changed when Paul came. That night Lane saw him out by the dock she told her sister, "The guy in three is kind of strange, huh?"

"He's in love with you," Elsa replied.

"No," Lane said. "Maybe he's interested in me, but he's not in love."

Elsa shrugged. "Well if he's interested in you, he'll be in love with you soon enough."

Lane had kissed her sister on the cheek then and they had watched part of some old movie starring Humphrey Bogart. They turned it off when he appeared in a sailor suit holding a broken bottle. "He was kind of an ass," Elsa said.

The next time Paul came back, Elsa seemed glad. They joked about the color Elsa had painted the kitchen. It was called cheesecake. They seemed to talk for at least an hour about wine, a topic that Lane knew absolutely nothing about.

Lane knew it wasn't that Elsa didn't like Paul or that she didn't want Lane and Paul to be happy together. It was just that, when Paul arrived on the scene, their weird little life became two separate things quite instantly. Paul's presence made Lane's life a little less weird. Maybe it made Elsa's life feel even weirder.

When Lane decided to go to St. Louis for the week, Elsa seemed concerned. She was getting ready to go cross country skiing with their only neighbor, Harold Wall. He was some kind of ghost writer. "Isn't St. Louis the murder capital of the world?"

"I think that's New Orleans," Lane said.

"Whatever," Elsa said, "Just be careful. Don't let him hit you."

"What did you say?" Lane felt like she couldn't blink her eyes.

Elsa wrapped her scarf around her neck one more time. "You heard me," she said.

Lane left without saying goodbye.

When Paul came to live at the resort, everything went wrong. Lane and Elsa had discussed it all beforehand. Elsa had said oh that's fine, just fine, plenty of room in the house for everyone. But at dinner that first night, Elsa seemed frozen and uncomfortable, she spoke softly when she spoke at all. After dinner, she went out for a walk and Lane didn't see her again that night; she must have slipped into the house and gone straight to bed.

"Maybe I should go," Paul said. "Maybe I should rent a house in town."

"No," Lane said. "She said she was okay. We discussed it."

"It must be a big adjustment."

Lane shook her head. "She's my sister. This is where we *live*. It's like she's turning herself into an old maid."

Apparently, Elsa canceled all the reservations in cottage one without telling Lane, because the next morning Lane saw her rolling one of her suitcases across the lawn. The wheels made long ruts in the grass and Lane caught herself worrying it would die.

"There is plenty of room for all of us," Lane told her, running to catch up. But she held the cottage door open as Elsa lifted her suitcase onto the stoop. "You don't want to live in one of these cottages, do you?"

"I do," she said. "This is my favorite cottage." Elsa smiled at her.

"You *hate* this cottage."

"I hate to *clean* it. I never said I hate to live in it."

After that, Lane could never get Elsa to talk about any of it. "I know this must be really weird for you," Lane said once when they were out in the row boat.

"What's weird for me?" Elsa said.

Lane shook her head and rowed back toward the shore. They never once argued about Paul or the marriage, they never even mentioned it. After that, it was just like they weren't even sisters, like they'd never been close. It was like Lane had betrayed her. Had Lane betrayed her? Was it ridiculous for Lane to think she would just stay here? She started treating Elsa like a guest. She didn't know how else to treat her.

When the winter came, Elsa moved to Madison. "I'm tired of this," Elsa said. "I want to open a tea shop."

Lane hadn't ever heard Elsa mention a tea shop before. She shook her head.

"I want to make some money," Elsa said.

"Yeah," Lane said. "The real money's in tea."

Elsa shrugged. "Well, we know it's not in lake resorts. We can check that one off the list."

Lane cried for weeks after Elsa left. Paul kept saying, "I'm sorry. It must have been an enormous adjustment."

"Not that *enormous*," she said when she finally stopped crying. She wrote Elsa a letter, but Elsa never answered it and after a while Lane let the whole thing fade in her mind. It scared her how good she was at doing this, at letting people disappear. But what else *could* you do? There were cottages to clean and boats to bail. There were guests to smile at. The seasons kept coming anyway, one after the other.

*

Lane and Paul were weeding the big flower garden. Usually Lane did this by herself. Over the years business had picked up significantly and there wasn't time for both of them to hang around, doing things together. They each did the jobs they liked best and the jobs the other person couldn't stand. That's how they divided it up. Paul usually mended screen doors and cleaned cottages, repaired docks and hauled garbage, but, lately, since that talk about Omaha, he had been wandering around behind her again, helping her with whatever she was doing. He felt guilty, she could tell. And why shouldn't he feel guilty? She felt guilty too. She started to feel like the whole thing had already been decided. That their life had split into two, that he was going to Omaha and she could come if she wanted. But the reverse was true also, she was staying here and he could stay if he chose to. They were both to blame, there was no possibility of winning.

He had signed up for *this*, though, from the beginning. Nobody had ever mentioned anything about Omaha.

She was standing in the center of the garden, between the daylilies and the irises. The wind was blowing, waving the daylilies back and forth, and the orange petals of one of them kept brushing against her leg. It felt like skin might have felt if it wasn't connected to anything, soft and strange. It gave her the creeps and she had to get out of the garden; she stepped around the plants and came out onto the grass next to him. "I hate daylilies," she said. She looked at him.

He stood up, brushed off his hands. "Yeah, I always wondered about that. What your deal was with all these daylilies."

"They were here when I bought the place. They never seem to die."

"They're not very pretty."

"Exactly," she said. "Flowers are supposed to be pretty, right?"

"I'd say so."

She dug her toes into the grass. This place had the softest grass she had ever stepped on, she pulled on it with her toes and she could feel the thin roots ripping. His baseball cap was turned to one side and on him there was no way it could look intentional. It looked like someone had thrown the hat at him and through some strange coincidence it had landed on his head. It was kind of perfect, actually. He looked perfect. She kept looking at him and after a moment he moved the hat. He took it off and put it back on again, this time carefully, firmly, the way people tie roller skates.

"I liked it the way it was," she said and part of her was about ready to start crying.

"Really?" he said. "I thought you didn't like it. I thought that's why you were looking at me like that."

She shook her head. She took off her glove and touched the pale side of his arm. Slipped her hand up to the inside of his elbow. He took her hand, but it was weird. He got that she was asking for something, but he didn't know what. She didn't know what either. She pulled away and stepped back into the garden.

"What if we had a baby?" she asked him after a while. She was pretty sure the idea appealed to him.

He stood up straight. "In Omaha?"

She shrugged. "Or here."

"Do you want to have a baby?" He was holding up a tiny clump of roots and dirt and green.

"That's not the kind of question you can just answer," she said.

He laughed. "Whatever," he said. "That means you don't want to have a baby. Especially not in Omaha."

She ignored this, kept weeding, and accidentally pulled up a daylily that wasn't blooming. She swore and said, "Now I'm pulling flowers." She held up the plant for him to see. It was long, like some kind of reed that might grow in the water. Its roots were brown. They looked like tiny tree roots.

"It's like a Freudian slip or something. Maybe we should just pull them all out. Plant something different."

She stood up straight and looked at him. Maybe he was totally crazy. "No. That would leave a big hole. We need something tall there."

He shrugged and went right back to weeding as if now he had a passion for it. He started to whistle. That really bothered her. How could you whistle now. She dropped her gloves in the garden and walked away. The grass in the shade was cool on her feet and after she passed through the shade she stopped and stood in the warmer grass. She looked up at the sky, which was so incredibly blue, and the sunlight was coming down the way it does in postcard photographs. The tops of the trees were shaking in the wind and they were really beautiful, the way they twined together and pulled apart. There were moments like this that hit her, just out of nowhere, and reminded her why she had wanted to do this in the first place: buy this silly resort, this row of cottages on 400 feet of lakeshore in a part of Wisconsin where they would always make enough money to live, but never enough money to do anything else—not to take real vacations of their own, not to buy new cars, not to retire. But it was such a nice dream, even now, and on a day like this there was no way you could deny it.

"Lane," he called then. "What about hollyhocks?"

She walked back over there. Hollyhocks would work just fine.

*

After that Lane started to panic. How were they ever going to figure this out? Wasn't she just being selfish? Wasn't he being selfish? Couldn't they just flip a coin? She would have liked to say yes. You flip a coin and I'll start the packing. But the thing was she didn't want to go. She didn't want him to go. Why couldn't they just do *this*? Why couldn't he work in a lab in Oconomowoc. He could commute. She told him that one night in bed and he put his arms around her. "There aren't labs in Oconomowoc."

"Have you checked?" she asked him.

"Well, no, but I just know—there aren't any labs in Oconomowoc."

"But you haven't actually checked so you don't really know," she said. She knew she sounded bitter. She rolled over, away from him, and tried to sleep. As she lay there she just kept thinking about the sounds of the lake. What did other people hear when they were falling asleep? Traffic? Their neighbors having sex? Raccoons in the garbage?

"You should take a vacation," he said, wherever he was, in the darkness. "You should go somewhere else. You haven't been anywhere else in a long time."

It was true. They had gone to Chicago for their anniversary a few years ago. They'd spent a weekend inFlorida the winter before last. What did a vacation have to do with it?

"I don't want to go to Omaha," she said then.

"I know," he said and started laughing. "I really do."

*

Lane went to see her sister. She drove to Madison on a Sunday afternoon, straight to the teashop. The whole drive there she kept trying to imagine what Elsa would look like now. She would be pale. She would wear a flowered apron, one of those retro aprons everyone was selling. Elsa didn't like printed fabrics though. Maybe she would have a solid colored apron. A plain white apron with her strings crossed around her waist twice. Once in front and once behind. That was the sort of apron Lane imagined real bakers, French bakers, wore. But, she reminded herself, Elsa didn't open up a bakery. She opened a tea shop. Maybe she didn't even wear an apron.

The display in the window of the tea shop was gorgeous. Lane drove by it and knew immediately that this was Elsa's place. It was an old fashioned shop window and its false bottom was covered in piles of white feathers, like someone had cut open a pillow. A giant teapot sat on a mound of them. It was very round and smooth looking, painted a pale yellow with white trim. The porcelain was matte like a tightly woven piece of fabric or the surface of an old photograph. The spout curved like a hook and the handle was exaggerated, seemed almost the size of the pot itself. Above the teapot hung small purple birds. Their bodies were lavender feathers and their wings were covered in indigo glitter. They had false blue eyes and bright orange beaks and they swung on their invisible strings whenever the door opened.

A woman about her age went into the shop and Lane followed her. The inside extended the theme of the window. There were birds hanging from the ceiling: blue birds, yellow canaries, love birds, drab purple martins. Lane thought the bird thing could have gotten out of hand. If you hung too many birds they would all swing in opposite directions at the same time, it would look like birds attacking. But Elsa had placed the birds thoughtfully, there weren't too many. The effect was charming. The floor was covered in black and white tile and there were café tables placed carefully here and there. Lane walked up to the counter and saw her sister sitting in a folding chair just behind the pastry case. She was asleep. The woman who'd come in ahead of Lane reached around the case, tapped Elsa's shoulder, and then deftly pulled her arm away and straightened up.

"She does this all the time," the woman said softly to Lane. "She sleeps sometimes in the afternoon."

"Why?" Lane asked.

The woman shrugged. "She must be tired. Nobody seems to mind."

Lane nodded.

The woman felt compelled to add, "I think she's from the North East or somewhere."

Lane nodded again. She saw the tiny flutter of Elsa's eyelids. She saw Elsa sit up straight and run her hands over her hair before she sprang to life.

"Oh my God, Terry, I can't believe I did it again. I should have opened a coffee shop."

The woman ahead of Lane giggled. She ordered a specific combination of tea, smoke road and rose hips, Lane thought she said. Elsa folded up the chair and fixed the tea quickly, slipping from one place to another, getting this little jar here, this cup there, this spoon from over that way. She was wearing a white half apron with an appliqué strawberry on its pocket.

Elsa brought the tea over to the counter and said, "You saw me asleep, you get your tea free. That's the deal here."

"Oh, no," the woman said. "I'd be asleep too." She held out a twenty.

"No way," Elsa said. "I'll see you tomorrow."

The woman giggled again and dropped the twenty into the tip jar. Then she waved goodbye.

Lane stepped closer to the counter. Elsa and Lane stood looking at each other. Elsa waited for the door to shut behind the woman and then she lowered her eyes to the jar. She smiled. "Keep the change," she said.

"Is that like your sting, or something?"

Elsa made a face. "Come on. Just because I know it might happen, doesn't mean it's my fault if it does."

Lane tried to think whether or not that made any sense. Whether it was supposed to be some kind of comment on their situation, some kind of jab. She tried to think about it, but found she had already forgotten the all words, couldn't even remember now what Elsa had said.

"This is a great place," Lane said. "It's darling."

"Thanks," Elsa said, leaning against the counter. "You look wonderful. So tan."

"Well, you remember how it is. It's like being a day laborer."

Elsa smiled. "Yeah," she said. "I remember."

*

Not even six months later, Lane stumbled on an article about Elsa's tea shop in *Travel* magazine. They had done a feature on Madison. Elsa was there, standing beside her shop window in a blue dress and that white apron with the strawberry on the pocket. She was smiling and the sunlight was pouring down on her face. She looked beautiful and glowing.

The next time Lane and Paul were in Madison, they stopped by the famous tea shop to see Elsa, but the place was empty. The windows were covered in newspaper. There was no for sale sign and Lane told Paul she would have put a little money on Elsa not having sold the shop at all. "She'll just keep it up her sleeve," Lane said.

When they finally decided to leave the resort, Lane still couldn't sell it. She hired a caretaker, a young woman named Mikala. She was Russian. She looked to Lane like a

gypsy, if only because she wore a silk scarf around her hair. That's a stereotype, Elsa would have said, and in her mind Lane said something to excuse herself.

Lane gave Mikala a picture of her sister. If you ever see a woman who looks like this walking down the road, you let me know. Mikala nodded gravely, like she understood completely, and Lane figured she probably did.

GIRLS OF EASY VIRTUE

Technically, the women were Richard's fault. He had found them for her when he was finally too sick to run. It was the sort of thing Sharon had expected to happen sooner. The doctors diagnosed him with melanoma and she prepared herself for the worst. They lay in bed and she cried. She tried not to put too much pressure on his chest when she leaned against him and he laughed and said, "What're you doing it like that for?" They cut the brown spots out of his skin, but that was all. Nothing happened for a year at least and she stopped believing that anything would. One day then, the cancer metastasized and he stopped being okay. It was like the sickness had tracked him down, hired a private detective or bought a dog who could sniff him out. Somehow it had caught him.

All three of these women were younger than Sharon, but they ran long distances five times a week; they were serious runners like she was. He said, "Come on, you don't want to run all by yourself."

"How do you know?" she said. "I ran by myself before you started running."

"And that was what now, fifteen years ago?"

"Sixteen," she said. She remembered because he started running with her the year they moved to North Carolina, the same year he quit drinking, the same year they almost got divorced. Their daughter Kelley had been ten years old and all she ever seemed to say was, "People, *what* is going on here?" Sharon had almost wanted her to disappear, so she wouldn't see who they really were. When Sharon thought of that time, she remembered the feeling of sliding down the wall your back is up against, the slipping feeling— inching down forever and the floor seeming sudden because it should have

been there a long time ago—and Richard standing over her, saying something that would have been frightening if it hadn't been Richard saying it. Instead there was only the panic of realizing you care too much to cut your losses, that this horrible problem is one you actually have to puzzle out. "What would you do if failure weren't an option?" her father had said to her once years and years ago, when she was bombing high school algebra. It was stupid; she'd since seen the same question in women's magazines, in ridiculous spy movies, but, stupid or not, that's how she had felt the year Richard started running. "You run too slow," she had told him on more than one occasion, but he didn't care; it was clear that he'd decided already and nothing was going to stop him.

Now Sharon ran with the women to make him feel better and after a while it got even worse: they started coming to her house for smoothies every Tuesday, after their long run. In truth they spent a lot of time together, but Sharon took comfort in reminding herself that time spent didn't necessarily mean anything. She knew them just well enough to know she didn't want to know them better. That's what she told Richard one Tuesday, after the women had gone home. "I'm almost embarrassed to be seen with them," she said.

"Oh come on," Richard said. "Nobody's *that* bad."

She turned around to look at him. "You're one to talk," she said. "You hide from the Hospice lady."

"That's because she's always trying to counsel me about my impending death."

"Your death is not impending," Sharon said.

He looked at her sharply, as if he were annoyed, and then he lay his head back on the pillow. "They don't give you hospice, Sharon, unless they're sure you need it."

"That isn't true," she said, knowing that it was true, more or less. As much as anything could be. She took her running clothes off and lay down on the bed beside him. She put her hand on the side of his face. "You can't die. It's impossible."

Richard shifted his head so he could see her face. "It's like we need to get you one of those children's books, where did my doggie go, why isn't grandpa breathing?" The last of what he said turned into a weird moan and she laughed. She moved closer to him.

"Baby, I'm going to die," he said.

Sharon sat up and kicked the covers off, the satin duvet and the pale yellow sheets. "You've always wanted to die." She got out of bed and walked over to the dresser, found some clean underwear in her top drawer.

He covered his eyes with his hand, very weary. "What are you talking about?"

"Some little part of you."

He moved his hand and looked at her. It was a threatening look. She looked back at him; she smirked and shrugged the way she would never have smirked or shrugged at anyone else. The way she had always done, since she was a very young woman. "I'm just saying."

He laughed then, covered his eyes once more, and she got back into bed beside him without really thinking about what she was doing. She wanted him to let her pretend that none of this was happening. Maybe it was delusional, the result of mean, childish grief, but she felt like it was his fault. She felt that, somehow, if he would just cooperate, they could pull off some grand evasion.

The women were over for smoothies when Richard fell. She heard him swearing, almost, muttering some stern and garbled message. The three sweaty women looked

around, stunned. They were sitting on faded beach towels draped over the matching velvet sofas in her living room. It was they who insisted on towels, not Sharon. The blonde one, Dawn, clutched her chest, as though the sounds carried through her body like the aftershocks of some earthquake. Cora looked up at the ceiling. Her eyes were bulging the way they always seemed to, her tight mouth turned up at the corners. Jamie, the tiny one, the mother of boys who would soon tower over her, immediately sprang up. She looked at Sharon like she was trying to see how bad it was.

Sharon ignored her and ran into the bedroom. She saw him there, in his pajamas, stretched out on the floor beside the bed. He kept his head down, forehead flat against the floor, like someone who has already decided he is never getting up again. She stood over him, her hands darting toward him and then pulling away, not knowing what to do. He looked up at her, his eyes blank and wet. She made a high, sharp sound—like a bird, she thought, seeing herself from far away, trying to draw herself back down. It was horrifying how helpless he was, how helpless she was. Something came over his face then, as if to say, "See how it's true?" He dropped his head again and she got down on the floor beside him. One of the women came to the bedroom doorway. Sharon turned to look at her. Suddenly she couldn't remember any of the women's names. This was the tiny one, the one with all the sons. Her eyes were wide and she said something softly.

Sharon sat up on her knees. She tried to hide him with her body. "Please get out of here," she said.

The tiny woman said something else and, behind her, in shadow, Sharon could see the one with the bulging eyes. Sharon repeated herself, raising her voice. "Go," she said. When she heard the front door shut, she lay down beside Richard, her face next to his, her

forehead on the floor, her arms folded into her chest the way his were. She brushed her lips against the side of his face. He turned to her. He said, "Well, here we are, boss." His voice just like always.

*

Richard was dead now. But when he was alive he had liked to hear her complain about the women from the neighborhood. "What's with these women?" she had always asked him. "Do you really think they feel like hanging out after running eighteen miles?" She remembered looking at him, at the side of his face against the pillow. When his smile stretched up, you could see the places where the skin was getting old, getting thinner every day. She would keep talking without waiting for him to answer. He wasn't going to answer anyway. "Or do you think they feel obligated?"

"How should I know?" he'd said once. "I'm not allowed to meet them."

"*Dude,*" she'd said, mimicking the way Kelley said it, a joke between them. "Those women can't handle you. You would have a fucking field day."

He had sat up then, just a bit. "Why," he'd said, looking curious, smiling. He was flattered somehow. "What would I do?"

"Oh, God. They talk about whose kid wore what to the prom, and so and so's daughter ought to pledge the sorority, but she won't because she's too conservative, and then they break into these jokes about Botox and new husbands. Or these prudey old sex jokes. It's disgusting. It's like the kind of jokes my grandmother would have made at a bridal shower forty years ago. I'm like, 'How about some gin in that juice, bitches?' And I'm the *old* lady, Richard." She pointed to herself. "Me."

He was laughing now. "Listen to you. You're such a snob. You're the anti-snob snob."

This had made her laugh too, because he knew who she was. "I am not," she said. "Not at all." Somehow it made her want to bury her face in the pillow.

"Why do you hang out with them then? Just don't do it anymore."

"Ha," she said. "Mr. Logical." She lifted her face toward him and he looked at her like he'd made his point. "This is Women, Richard. You can't just do that. And anyway, ever tried running eighteen miles by yourself?" she'd asked him.

"What difference does it make? Before you were saying you *liked* running by yourself," he said.

"I don't know," Sharon said. "I guess it makes a difference."

He looked at the television. The Dow was down again. He looked at her and shook his head and neither of them said anything. Somebody new on CNN then, talked about Oprah's meeting with New England's apple farmers.

"Nobody's into oranges anymore, huh?" Richard said.

She looked at him, with her eyes narrow. She put her hand on his face. "You're obsessed."

"You ever tell them about Kelley?"

"Yeah right." Kelley had lived in New Mexico since she'd graduated from high school. That was the only part the women knew. They did not know that she managed a high-end pizza restaurant that employed only lesbians and sympathetic straight men. Kelley wanted to be a man, but not to have a penis; she believed that the gender one performed had nothing to do with one's physical sex. At least that was how she had

explained it the first time, just before she'd begged them for a double mastectomy—"top surgery" she had called it. She had been sixteen and Richard had lowered his voice, "Honey that'd cost way more than a car. Why can't you ask for a car?" Sharon had seen the tears in his eyes and Kelley had noticed them too—Kelley had started crying. She had always loved her father in a different way, in a more passionate way than she'd loved Sharon. Sharon hadn't cried, she only remembered feeling a little nauseous. It wasn't that Sharon minded so much about Kelley being queer. It was that double mastectomies were usually reserved for women who were almost dying. Was Kelley dying? No she was not.

When Kelley came for the funeral, Sharon was relieved to notice that she still hadn't had the surgery. Probably she couldn't afford it. It had occurred to Sharon then: now that Richard was gone, they would see each other less and less. And maybe she could accept that. You had to let people live their own lives. That was what she herself had wished for as a young woman, simply to be left alone.

And in that way, the weeks after Richard's death felt like being very young again. She wanted only to be alone. There was no one to be with, no real intimacy left for her, not anywhere in the world. Before all the people had cleared out, all the visiting relatives—Kelley and the aunts, the half-brothers and the sister-in-laws—someone had drawn all the blinds and closed the shutters. The house felt permanently cool, permanently dark. She lay in bed and thought how death was probably like this. Clean sheets in an empty house and the mortgage paid off, nobody popping in to ask you any questions. There was nowhere she had to be, nothing that was expected of her. There

was money in the bank, and three accounts at Vanguard. Sometimes she listened to the radio.

Sharon didn't think about running. The women she ran with, the women who used to come over every Tuesday afternoon, didn't even cross her mind. Still, her stomach flinched when the doorbell rang on Monday morning, exactly two weeks after Richard left (now she thought of it as him leaving, which wasn't fair. "Give me a break," he would've said. "I didn't leave you. I'm fucking *dead*."). She knew it was them. They were coming for her.

She tried to get out of bed. She rolled over and stuck her legs over the edge. They were wrapped up in the blue sheet and she had to kick herself free. She bought the blue sheets in 1978, the first year their printing business turned a profit. They had been shockingly expensive but also, she could see now, worth every penny. She took off her smelly shirt and threw it at the blank screen of the television. She tried to find a bra. She had started putting her clothes in his drawers with his clothes, mixing them up, but she had stopped and now there were clothes everywhere. She put on one of his t-shirts. The doorbell rang again. The shirt was very big, like a mini-dress. She thought of not putting on pants, of wearing just the shirt downstairs and answering the door as if she *were* wearing a dress. They would leave her alone, maybe, if she did something like that. She looked at herself in the mirror though, at her white legs with blue veins lumpy on the surface. She found a pair of yoga pants, put them on, and went downstairs.

There was a thin window on either side of the front door and you could see who was out there before they could see you. Dawn was standing directly under the enormous brass light fixture that hung from the high lintel of the porch's roof. It was like she'd

positioned herself there very carefully. It was like she didn't worry that the thing would fall and kill her. Another thing Sharon found strange: she was all dressed in white. She looked like a model in an ad for a Swedish ski resort, very pale and blonde, icy. Sharon took a deep breath before she opened the door. She stepped out onto the porch and let the storm door swish shut behind her.

"Sharon," Dawn said, like it was a question. She stepped toward her and held out her arms. It was awkward. She embraced Sharon like they both were extremely fragile, like she'd never given anyone a hug before.

Sharon felt smelly. She hadn't showered since he'd left. "Dawn," she said and then she couldn't think of anything else. She looked over the woman's shoulder. The first leaves were starting to fall on the lawn. Not the pretty ones. The brown ones that got sick of hanging in there.

"I'm so sorry," Dawn said. She pulled away from Sharon, but kept her hands on her shoulders, like she was starting to get the hang of this hugging business. Sharon was afraid it was turning into a movie hug, where people took a break to give each other a long look. And she was right, Dawn looked her in the eyes, really looked at her, and Sharon thought maybe she'd never looked Dawn in the eyes before. She noticed now that they were lovely, bluish green and flecked with black. "I'm so sorry," Dawn said again and Sharon started crying. She broke down like some kind of child. Dawn took her hand and pulled her down to the top step of the porch. It was cold concrete. They sat there, watching the cars drive by in the street. "I'm pretty sure he doesn't like being dead," Sharon told her. After she said it, she flinched. She figured Dawn would tell her

something about being at home with Jesus. But Dawn didn't say anything and she didn't go away.

On Tuesday, Cora came and Sharon realized that the women had organized themselves, maybe even set up a schedule. Maybe it was their mission now to save her. Sharon was embarrassed. She wished these women didn't know how alone she was. She thought about not answering the door, but as she stood at the top of the steps she could see Cora fidgeting on the porch, like she was nervous in her patent leather driving moccasins and her crisp white shirt. Her face was made-up like she was ready to read the evening news on TV. Sharon felt sorry for her. She went downstairs and opened the door.

"Sharon," Cora said, holding up a plate of muffins from the bakery. She had put them on a plate to make them seem more homemade. Under the plate was a stack of cards drawn by her youngest daughter. She handed them to Sharon, who by now had had a shower and put on one of his sweatshirts. Sharon had met Cora's daughter once; she had come with her mother, on a run. She and Sharon had finished the last two miles together; she had paced with the girl, slowly, because she didn't think a girl that young should run so much. All the cards were red construction paper folded in half. Each had a large heart drawn on the front with a sharpie. Then there were glittering red and blue drops falling around each heart in evenly spaced groups of three. They looked like valentines for broken-hearted people. "Death is a hard concept for girls her age," Cora said, looking down at the card. It was almost like she was apologizing. "But she *is* thinking of you. She wanted me to bring them."

"That's so sweet," Sharon said, looking the cards over. The uniformity of each card was amazing.

"So sweet," Cora said, her Southern accent making the word long. She started to fidget again.

Sharon turned the bottom card over. On the back there was a drawing of a very human looking bear. "It looks like a Grateful Dead bear," she told Cora without thinking.

Cora looked at her. Her eyes were wide and suspicious. "Sure," she said.

"Richard liked them when they first got together," she told Cora, not knowing why she was doing it. "Once Mickey Hart gave him a pair of drum sticks."

"A pair of drum sticks?" Cora asked, as if she didn't know what that was either.

"You know, drum sticks." Sharon pretended to play the drums.

"Oh, of course," Cora said, nodding.

On Wednesday Jamie brought a tuna casserole, the kind made with canned peas and Ruffles. "I know it's kind if gross," Jamie said. "But when you really stop to think about it, what else can you eat at a time like this?" Sharon almost laughed and she let Jamie come inside, though she regretted it when Jamie went right into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator door. There were fruit flies in there, buzzing slow, stunned by the cold. Sharon could only imagine how much mold was growing in the refrigerator. "Oh," Jamie said softly. Sharon guessed the poor girl was realizing that she should have known better than to open some grieving woman's refrigerator. Being young was just as bad as being old. Sharon wanted to say, "It's all right now. You'll never do *that* again," but she didn't. She thought of that picture published in the tabloids after Anna Nicole Smith's death, a picture of her refrigerator: only Slimfast and methadone inside.

Sharon figured Jamie was the last visitor and on Thursday she expected no one. When the doorbell rang she happily imagined a Jehovah's Witness or a man selling pine straw. But it was Cora, fidgeting out on the porch. She'd brought information about a marathon in New Mexico. She didn't mess around. Brochures and entry forms, fliers about hotel reservations. "Doesn't your daughter live in Santa Fe?" she asked.

Sharon looked at her blankly. There were red blotches all over her face—"an accident," Cora explained, "with an at-home microdermabrasion kit." She looked Sharon in the eyes and said, "Make-up would have only made them look worse."

"That's true," Sharon said.

Cora nodded and waved her hand as if to dismiss the subject. "We'd all love to meet your daughter," she said.

Sharon took the papers out of her hand. A marathon in Santa Fe, early October. She looked up at Cora without saying anything.

"Well, you're not going to quit running are you?" Cora said.

Sharon shrugged. "I hadn't thought about it."

"You hadn't thought about quitting?"

"I hadn't thought about running."

"Oh no," Cora said. Cora's eyes bulged in a way that unsettled Sharon. It made her feel like Cora was very unhappy with her.

"Honey, there's plenty of time to train," Cora went on. "We thought it would be perfect for you, your first marathon. Sometimes you just need a project."

Sharon didn't know what to say. What kind of project would fix this? "I might not be around that weekend," Sharon said.

Cora looked at her like she knew it was a lie.

"I'll think about it," she said. And that was true. She thought a long time about Kelley. She thought about these women, about this house and Richard and running long distances for no real reason. She wondered how much you could pare away before you were gone.

*

"Hey," Sharon said when her daughter finally picked up the phone. "It's me." Her own voice sounded strange, the way it lowered when she was talking to someone she knew really well. How long had it been since she'd talked to someone she knew really well?

"Hey," Kelley said. "I was just going to call you."

"Yeah?" Sharon said. "What's going on?"

"I just wanted to see how you were doing."

Sharon looked out the window. The wind was blowing hard. "I'm doing weird," she said. She watched a car that had stopped in the middle of the road. The driver got out and walked to the back of the car. He opened the trunk and slammed it back down. She could tell that the car stereo was blasting even though she couldn't hear the music.

"I'm doing kind of weird too," Kelley said.

Sharon told her about the running women and how she wasn't sure if she liked them. She told her about the race in Santa Fe.

"So Dad kicks it and now you're, like, going on tour with the desperate housewives of Bible Belt County?" Kelley said.

Sharon laughed. "No, no. It's just for the marathon. I can hang out with you, that's the idea."

"Cool," Kelley said. "That sounds good. What weekend is it?"

"The 15th."

"Of October?"

"Yep," Sharon said. "You have something going on then?"

"Sex Worker's Art Show." Kelley said it fast.

"What?"

"Sex Worker's Art Show."

"What is *that*?" Sharon was thinking of scarves knitted by whores, of muted landscapes painted by strippers. Of the running women sipping wine from plastic cups, musing over ceramic cocks on black pedestals.

"It's this performance art thing. We host it every year at work. It's interesting. You know, it's making the point that these women do something important."

"That stripping and turning tricks is an art which contributes to society?" Sharon said.

"You don't have to be unpleasant and narrow minded," Kelley said. "Maybe you need to stop spending so much time with your yuppie friends."

"They're hardly yuppies," Sharon said. "And that word doesn't even mean anything anymore." When she stopped speaking she could hear Kelley taking deep breaths in rapid succession. "Sorry," she said then.

"No, I'm sorry," Kelley said. "I'm sorry. Just come. You'll like it, you always end up liking what you don't think you will."

"I do?"

"I don't know," Kelley said. "That's what Richard always said."

"Oh." Since when did she call him Richard? Sharon always forgot that there were things between them she didn't know about. "Well, okay, I'd like to see what's going on with you." It came out stupid and she didn't know how to fix it.

"Okay," Kelley said.

"Okay," Sharon said. "Good deal."

**

Sharon sat beside Jamie on the plane. Cora and Dawn sat behind them, next to an older man wearing a bow tie. Sharon was beginning to think that Jamie had been specially charged with taking care of her. She thought of Richard. He might have answered, "Maybe she just *likes* you. I like you. Why wouldn't she?" The longer he was dead the more he talked to her and she guessed that she had never thought this much about him when he was alive. Jamie clutched Sharon's hand during take-off. "Don't laugh at me," she said softly.

Sharon shook her head. "I think it's a natural thing to be afraid of, for Christ's sake. People aren't supposed to *fly*."

Jamie laughed and Sharon felt bad for saying "Christ." Dawn flinched every time you did it. Her blonde head sinking forward like someone falling unexpectedly asleep. Sharon looked back at her; she was paging through her magazine. Maybe she hadn't heard. In the airport they had all bought a magazine. Each of them bought a different one so they could switch. It was Cora's idea. "Four magazines for the price of one," she had said and Sharon had replied, "Kidneys, man."

"Pardon?" Cora had said.

Sharon had tapped her forehead with her index finger. "That's smart," she had said.

"*Oh*." Cora had nodded a little too much.

They hadn't gotten to the switching part yet and every once in a while Sharon looked down at her copy of *Cooking Light*. She had wanted to get something that the other women would be interested in, but how many times could you read about the healthy *new* way to prepare cream soups?

Sometimes Cora and Dawn spoke to them through the cracks between the seats. "Did you know that cellulite is genetic?" Cora asked.

"*Cora*," Jamie said without looking up from her magazine. It was strange to hear her speak so sharply. "You didn't know that?"

"No," Cora said. "Why didn't you tell me?" She was laughing, squeezing her bulgy eyes shut.

"That's news from 1992," Jamie said.

"Well, I didn't have cellulite in 1992," Cora said.

"I did," the man in the bow tie said and all the women laughed. The man laughed too. "No, really," he said. "It's just like any other kind of body fat."

The plane dropped then, who knows how many feet. Jamie squeezed Sharon's hand even harder and folded her legs up to her chest.

"You're right," Cora said. "That's exactly what this article says."

Now Sharon's hand was wedged against Jamie's chest and she could feel the circulation going. Her watch band was cutting into her wrist. The captain came on, sounding a little too jolly. "Whoa, folks," he said.

Jamie looked at Sharon and said, "What kind of pilot is he?"

Sharon shook her head. She didn't know. "Glorified bus driver," she said.

Jamie shut her eyes.

"Buses are more dangerous," Sharon added.

After the pilot stopped talking everyone was quiet, waiting, it seemed, for the next surprise. Sharon heard Cora say something quietly to Dawn, something about is your daughter still dating that Johnson kid. Dawn shook her head. "Sex," Dawn said. Sharon didn't understand what she meant at first. "Yeah," Cora said. "I know."

"How old is she?" the man in the bow tie asked.

Dawn sniffed. Sharon was surprised that she actually answered. "Eighteen," Dawn said.

"Old enough," he said.

"Not in my house," Cora said. She said it in a low voice, the words very calm and hard.

The bow tie man laughed and Jamie looked over at Sharon. She made a face, her lips curled together and her eyes smiling.

The fasten seatbelt sign dinged off and the man got up and walked down the aisle to the bathroom. When he came back and sat down, Cora looked at him. "Your stupid bow tie is a pathetic cry for attention," she said. "You think we like you, we only tolerate you. That's what women do."

The man looked at Cora, his face turned red. After a moment he laughed, thinking, Sharon guessed, that all the other women would laugh with him. They didn't. He got back up and teetered down the aisle again. Sharon turned to the window; it was the sort of scene she would have told Richard about. "She ought to jump out the window," he might have said. "Get to martyrdom that much sooner." She thought of him smiling suddenly, struck with a brilliant idea. "Hey, why doesn't she just join Al'Qaeda?"

Sharon might have defended Cora then. "She has a small point."

"You're kidding me."

"A tiny point, it's all very complicated. Haven't you ever read Virginia Woolf?" This would have made him laugh.

The shuttle bus from Albuquerque to Santa Fe was crowded and the women sat together in the long back seat, the one that's only supposed to hold three people. Jamie was looking through Dawn's copy of *OK*. Looking over her shoulder, Sharon had counted 47 pictures of Katie Holmes shopping with her daughter and her mother in Boston. The pictures transfixed her. Katie Holmes looked so strange and tired, still lovely but grayed over and a little puffy around her face. Her mother looked so normal. She was wearing frumpy clothes, brown and black and navy blue, all of these conflicting neutrals. You'd think Katie would have said, "Mom, they're going to take pictures of us. Maybe you should change your pants." She hoped that Kelley would do that for her and then she wanted to laugh. She would try to do that for Kelley, and Kelley would compare her to Cora or Dawn.

Sharon turned away from the magazine. She looked straight ahead, at the landscape through the windshield. The sky was low and huge and blue; the land was brown and flat. It seemed like they were about to drive over the edge of the world, to choose sky all by itself. She thought, how lovely.

**

The shuttle dropped the women off at their hotel. Sharon was staying with Kelley and she was supposed to be here by now, to pick Sharon up. She was embarrassed as the women stood around her, beside all their bags, on the concrete outside the fancy redwood lodge, waiting with her. "There's a spa," Jamie said, looking up from the brochure. "We should go right away. We should do pre-marathon and post-marathon treatments. We could take before and after pictures."

"Yeah," Sharon said. "You all should go ahead and get settled. Kelley is always a little late when she's coming from work."

"No trouble," Cora said.

"We don't mind waiting," Dawn said. She shook her blonde head gently.

Sharon resented them. She felt like they were just curious, like they wanted to see Sharon's mysterious daughter. It almost made her want to laugh: they had no idea. Sharon couldn't imagine what they would do when they saw her. She started to worry that she was a little bit ashamed, no better than Cora with her daughter's sympathy cards. After all, Kelley was not an alien. It was more that she couldn't help but think that these women would see her as an alien. Now Sharon couldn't figure out who she was more ashamed of, these women or her daughter. Herself? "I don't know, you guys, she might be a while," Sharon said. "I might take a walk around."

"With your suitcase?" Cora said. "No."

Then Sharon's phone rang. It was Kelley. She started speaking before Sharon had a chance to say hello. "I'm coming, I'm turning onto Guadalupe right now. I'm sorry, we got a rush just as I was trying to leave."

"No problem," Sharon said. "I'm just fine."

The women all looked at her. "She on her way?" one of them asked.

Sharon nodded.

Kelley's car ran on used cooking oil and this made its old diesel engine even louder than it already was. The car growled up the circular drive where the women were standing. Kelley turned off the engine and got out. When Sharon saw her she wasn't ashamed; she didn't think about the women. Kelley more or less radiated. She had dark eyes that flashed, just like Richard's really. Her whole face had a brightness to it. Even with the shaved head, her face was beautiful. Her angelic features were undone only subtly by fine black hair growing over the sides of her face and the tiny blue tattoos at the edges of her cheek bones and around the line of her jaw. Sharon didn't care that Kelley's black t-shirt was covered in flour and bits of pizza dough, that there were floury hand prints on the back of her black workpants. She didn't care that she was still wearing a white half apron covered in tomato stains or that you could see the outline of three cigarette lighters and a man's billfold through the apron's pocket. She was lanky, boney really, and though she had not had the surgery, Sharon could see that she bound her breasts somehow, with some tight sports bra or something. Sharon held her arms out. "Oh my God," she said. "You look so good. So happy."

Kelley put her arms around her mother. "Happy?" she said. "I'm smelly."

Sharon laughed. She pressed her nose against her daughter's shoulder, the way she used to when Kelley was in high school and they still fought with her about smoking. She pretended to sniff wildly. "I like it. You smell like pizza." This was only half true. She also smelled like dishwater and sweat.

Kelley seemed pleased by this. She took a step away and looked her mother over. "You look good too. A little skinny, but we can fix that."

Sharon laughed again.

"Damn, though," Kelley said. "I keep thinking, where is Dad?"

"I *know*," Sharon said, shaking her head. "His voice is, like, on speaker phone in my brain. Always commenting about everything. It's sort of a drag, really. I can't tell him to shut up now that he's *dead*."

Kelley smiled at her with wet eyes and nodded. "I know, I know," she said, looking around at the other women who were shifting uncomfortably. She stepped close to her mother again.

Sharon looked around too. The running women seemed to be standing closer together now, almost huddled, as if to give Sharon and her little alien some space. If Richard had heard *that* he would have said, "It's you doing it, not them." "Kelley," Sharon said. "These are my running buddies." She introduced them all and Kelley smiled. She embraced each of them, very naturally, but, Sharon noticed, just like a man. The way men hug when they hug strange women casually, the way men who are used to hugging strange women do it, frat boys and human resource managers. She held her arms out wide and put a hand on the woman's shoulder, drawing her in and then closing up around her. Each of the women pulled away, quickly, smiling and embarrassed.

"We've heard so much about you," they said one after the other. "It's so nice to finally meet you." "You *do* smell like pizza," Jamie said and they all laughed awkwardly.

In the car Kelley said, "Jesus, mother, what's with this?"

"Oh you'll get used to them," Sharon said. "Actually I mostly like them. They're nice women. They've been kind to me." She looked down at the cigarette packages and the crumpled receipts littering the console. There were empty water bottles on the floor by her feet. She pointed to them and made a face.

Kelley shrugged. "These women don't break any gender norms. Not *any*."

"How do you know?" Sharon said. "You just met them."

"I'm pretty good at telling this stuff." They were at a stoplight now and she leaned back in her seat as she said this. She looked at her mother the way she had when she was a small child. Her face open and her eyes waiting.

"You *are*?" Sharon said in a funny voice, feeling herself all of a sudden talking to that same small child. She tipped her head back and forth, smiling a little. "Of course you are," she said.

"Whatever," Kelley said. They turned a corner, drove past an open space by the train tracks. "That's where the farmer's market is on Saturdays."

"Oh," Sharon said. It was this bright, desolate patch, moon-like somehow, right in the middle of everything. Blue, blue sky and old train cars around the edges of it. It made Sharon think of some kind of bone yard. She didn't know why; she had no idea what a bone yard would even look like.

"You got to take it easy on Marjorie," Kelley said then. Marjorie was her girlfriend. "She's got this new job working nights at the youth shelter and it really bums

her out. She has to stop them from sneaking out and having sex all night. And sometimes they cry themselves to sleep."

"I love Marjorie," Sharon said. She thought what Kelley said had sounded like the sort of thing people tell other people when they are really talking to themselves. Sharon and Marjorie always got along well on the telephone.

Kelley nodded as she parked the car into the driveway. "Me too."

Their little adobe house was dark and cool. It was smoky and smelled like a thrift store. Sharon left her suitcase in the living room and waited while Kelley changed her clothes in the bedroom. Marjorie came out wearing only a long t-shirt. Sharon wondered if it was one of Richard's. The girl was a bit younger than Kelley and she had long red hair that fell straight around her shoulders. It always struck Sharon as so funny—Marjorie was one of the most feminine, conventionally pretty girls Sharon had ever seen. She could never really understand how *they* were breaking gender norms either, not really.

"Sharon," Marjorie said, embracing her. "We're so glad you're here." Marjorie was the kind of woman who sounded like she meant everything she said. And maybe she did. That was probably why she was so beautiful.

"Thank you," Sharon said. "I really appreciate that." She hugged Marjorie again and kept holding her until Kelley came back out of the bedroom.

Sharon and Kelley walked around town. They talked about Richard, about death. They tried on hats at the Santa Fe Hat Company and looked at the silver jewelry spread out on blankets around the edges of the Plaza, at the Native American women sitting

shyly on the ground off to the side. "It embarrasses me," Kelley said after they'd moved on.

Sharon knew exactly what she meant. It embarrassed her too. "Yeah. Those poor women."

"Well, poor *us*," Kelley said. "We don't even know well enough to be ashamed of ourselves."

Sharon shrugged. But we are, she wanted to say, aren't we? Isn't that most of the problem? "What good does shame do anybody?"

Kelley looked at her. "You know what I mean," she said.

They bought tamales from a street vendor and ate them sitting on a bench. They talked about the art show. This year Kelley and her employees had built a stage. "You're not going to bring *them*, are you?" she asked Sharon.

"Hell no," Sharon said, looking around dramatically, like someone might hear her. "I was afraid you were going to make me."

"Whew," Kelley said, running her hand over her forehead.

Sharon noticed a new tattoo on Kelley's hand, a tiny hammer and sickle. "That's not homemade is it?"

"What?" Kelley looked at her hand. "It's for Dad," she said. She moved on without answering her mother's question, which meant that it *was* homemade. "I think you should definitely go," she said, about the art show. "You should see it."

"It'd be good for me, eh? Open up my little mind."

"Come on," Kelley said. "That's not what I meant."

That night Kelley made a bed for Sharon on the couch. The heater was broken and the high desert night was cold, even in October. The fabric of the couch was nubby and it had a hole in the middle of one of the cushions, where clumps of horse hair stuck out. Even with the sheet, Sharon could sometimes feel it scratching against her leg. She thought it felt like what a rat must feel like—that's what she would have told Richard: this couch feels like a goddamn city rat. Nighttime was the worst time for missing him. Over the course of thirty-five years, you forgot what it was like to sleep by yourself, not to have someone there to tell you that it isn't a rat, to tease you for worrying—even though you're really only pretending to be bothered so he will tease you and feel loved in that strange way only men seem to feel loved. Now, all of a sudden, it was just a couch with hair sticking out of it, itchy against your skin.

Kelley came out of her room, stepped lightly through the living room, passed the couch to the kitchen nook. Sharon closed her eyes when she went past. She heard her daughter sniffle like she was crying. Sharon heard the water run, she heard a glass clink, she heard another sniffle. She sat up and said, "Kelley, what's the matter?"

Kelley came and sat down on the couch, her wet face catching the light from the streetlamp outside. She smiled and shrugged. "I don't know, you want a list?"

"Ha," she said. "I know what you mean."

They lay down together on the couch. Sharon's arms wrapped around her daughter, her daughter's arms down at her sides like a child, like someone used to being held. "The hole in the couch feels like a city rat," Sharon said after they were settled.

"It's horse hair, silly. Only horse hair."

Sharon could see her smiling in the dark.

"A *city* rat," Kelley said, very amused. "You don't even know what a city rat feels like."

"Well, do you?" Sharon asked.

"Nope," Kelley said.

**

The next day Sharon went running with the women. It was harder to run at this high altitude. All the rest of them seemed unsurprised by this, but Sharon was kind of shocked. She knew it would be harder, but not this hard. They had lunch at a local place that Kelley had recommended. They served only sandwiches and pie. "This is so perfect," Jamie said and everyone agreed. They shopped after lunch and got expensive coffees and sat outside in the sun. The weather was also perfect: cool, but not too cool, sunny, but not blindingly bright. Later they went to the spa and got pedicures. "We're going to ruin them tomorrow," Cora said. "Just hush," Dawn said. "You sound like a man." After the pedicures they walked over to meet Kelley and Marjorie, who had taken the night off for the show, at a restaurant called Rio Chama. It was a longer walk than Sharon had anticipated. It seemed to go on and on and the women kept talking.

"So this is her girlfriend?" Cora said tentatively, in a very cheerful voice.

"Yes," Sharon said. "More like her partner, her wife, I guess. They've been together for a long time."

"They live together?" Dawn asked her.

"Yep," Sharon said. She nodded.

"So, she's, you know, a lesbian?" Cora asked.

All the women looked over at Cora, as if she'd said something she shouldn't have.

"I don't know if she'd actually call herself that," Sharon said and all the women looked at her now, surprised again. "It's more complicated than that, apparently. She'd say she was transgendered, maybe, or she would just tell you she was queer."

"I thought that was derogatory," Jamie said.

"Not when queer people call themselves that, I guess."

"It's like the n-word," Dawn said.

Sharon tried to keep her face from falling. "I don't know about this stuff really," she said. "I think maybe we're supposed to turn here."

At Rio Chama, Kelley and Marjorie were already seated side by side in a booth. Kelley stood up when she saw them walk in; she waved them over. She introduced all the women to Marjorie. "It's so nice to meet you all," Marjorie said and she immediately started talking about carbo-loading. "You guys have to get your glycogen stores up for the race."

"The race," Sharon said, grateful to have something to talk about. "I don't know if I can do it. It's so hard to breathe here."

Everyone seemed to gasp. "You can't not race," Cora said, "That's the whole point of coming out here." All of the others nodded.

Kelley laughed. "Her mind's made up," she said. "I can see it in her eyes."

Jamie looked at Sharon and then back at Kelley, "So *that's* what that look is." Jamie and Kelley smiled at each other.

After a while Marjorie excused herself to go to the bathroom.

"She's a lovely girl," Cora said to Kelley. "Really lovely."

"Thank you," Kelley said. She blushed. "I think so too."

When Marjorie came back she started talking about the Sex Worker's Art Show. Apparently Kelley hadn't mentioned to her that these other women weren't invited.

"Wait, what is this?" Jamie asked. "An art show?"

Marjorie talked all about it. "It's just for fun really, but it's also supposed to, you know, raise awareness about the sex industry."

"The sex industry?" Dawn said.

"Yeah, it's a huge industry in this country. Most people never think a thing about it," Marjorie looked at Sharon and shook her head. "You know?" she said to Sharon.

"I know," Sharon said. "I guess it's terrible." Sharon looked over at Kelley. She was quiet.

"It's at your work?" Jamie asked Kelley then.

Kelley nodded. "Only once a year," she said.

"Well we should go then," Jamie said. "We'd like to see where you work."

Sharon looked at Dawn and Cora who seemed to be turning white. Maybe it was her imagination.

Jamie kept talking about it. "It's not every day you get to experience something completely new," she said.

Sharon shrugged.

**

The Sex Worker's Art Show was packed. The restaurant had an open loft on the second floor, the type of balcony that churches have, churches and theaters. There were people seated on the edge of it, swinging their legs and looking down at the stage, holding beer bottles and glasses of wine. People on the balcony waved to Sharon and her

little crowd when they noticed the women looking up. Somebody whistled at them. There were people standing at the back of the main room, lined up along the wall. As she scanned the line Sharon saw one couple, two long haired girls, making out. While she was watching they slid down to the floor and stretched out at the other people's feet, not once separating their mouths. There was a man wearing a cabaret costume that seemed completely normal—sequined and feathered at its full bodice—until your eyes dropped below the waist; then it started to look like something out of that movie *A Clockwork Orange*. She and Richard had fought about that movie once. He had said that she didn't get it. Then Sharon heard Dawn gasp. She turned to see a normal looking woman about her age walking around with a clear glass dildo strapped to the outside of her clothes. The woman smiled at her warmly, her shoulders held back carefully, her hips tipped forward. Sharon smiled back at the woman before she turned away.

There were women wearing spiked dog collars and wife beater undershirts chatting happily with plain-looking people of all ages. An elderly woman in a flower print dress was listening intently to a long haired woman with a handlebar mustache. "Do you think that mustache is real?" Jamie whispered. "I don't know," Sharon said and she looked at Kelley. Kelley flinched. "Don't ask me," she whispered. "It's not like a club. We don't all know each other." Sharon looked at her: this was where Kelley worked, this was a small town. She was pretty sure that Kelley did know the woman; she was pretty sure the mustache was a fake—all for show and for shock. Kelley shrugged and Sharon could see that she was just as embarrassed as the rest of them. "There are babies here," Sharon heard Cora whisper as a woman carrying an infant car seat walked by. There are babies here, she thought to herself. There are babies everywhere. She was

about to usher her group back outside. Everyone in the whole place was looking at them now, standing lost like they were by the door. It felt ridiculous to be there. Then somebody called, "Hey Kelley." "Kelley and Marjorie!" some other people shouted.

"Hey," Kelley said. "This is my mom," she told the crowd. "Her name is Sharon."

"Hi, Sharon," everyone said. They were smiling.

"Hi," she said and waved, turning as she did so to acknowledge the crowd, looking up at the people perched on the balcony. She felt like she was on a parade float.

A group of young women sitting toward the front stood up. "You can sit here," one of the women said. She was wearing a shirt like the one Kelley wore when she worked; it was dusted in flour. "Thanks," Kelley said as she led their group into the row and sat down.

The first act was a Western number. The woman called herself Annie Oakley. She sang and stripped to a song from "Annie Get Your Gun." All the while she held a shotgun in her hand, positioning it this way and that, putting it between her legs, making it look like an erect penis that poked out from under her tiny leather skirt. She took off everything except her g-string and her cowboy boots. The clothes came off awkwardly, in a jumpy way. She flung her fringed bra violently and wiggled a little too much to get out of her skirt. It probably wasn't easy to strip while singing and jumping and pretending to have a shotgun for a penis, Sharon thought and she almost started laughing. She looked at Jamie sitting next to her. Her fingers were digging into her thighs and her mouth was held in a perfect straight line. Sharon looked around. She looked at other people's expressions. Nobody looked much different from Jamie—even the woman with

the dildo, even the woman with the mustache. Everyone looked like they were trying to do the right thing, react the right way. Sharon looked at the dark window behind the stage and wondered who was watching this from the outside. Occasionally Annie would turn to face the window, like she was wondering too. She would shake her butt for the audience, and then do a twisty little hop back to front and center. Something about the way she hopped that last time, Sharon knew it was almost over. At the end of the song Annie Oakley aimed the gun at the crowd and pretended to fire it just as a snare drum cracked. Sharon felt the whole audience tense up.

They applauded when the act was over. They whistled and shouted. Sharon turned to look at Jamie. When Jamie smiled at her, they both started to giggle. They looked over at Cora and Dawn; they were sitting straight and still on the other side of Kelley and Marjorie. Sharon saw Cora check her watch three times in a row. The whole audience broke into chatter and it didn't quiet down until the next act came on: a woman in a shimmering mermaid dress that was slit up to the hip on one side. Her hair and make-up were done '40's style and the music playing behind her was slow and full of sweeping violins. When she began to sing, she pulled from behind her back a rubber hand on a stick. The audience giggled but other people shushed them. Someone threw a pair of black panties onto the stage and someone else yelled, "Hey, sit down."

The woman's song was serious, about rape and homelessness. Still Sharon couldn't stop giggling as she watched the woman run the rubber hand over her body. Kelley shot her a look and then smirked at her. Somehow the woman used the hand to pull the dress off completely. Here was another woman in a g-string and high heels, singing about sad things while they sat there watching. Sharon looked around again. It

was a trap they were caught in. If you looked too much you were buying into it. If you looked too little you were a prude. If it turned you on you were a sicko, if it didn't turn you on you were repressed. The rubber hand crept down the woman's body and peals of drunken laughter came down from the balcony. Again someone shushed them loudly.

For the last act, a completely naked woman came out onto the stage. She was carrying an ordinary chair, the same kind that they were sitting in. She sat down in the chair, facing the audience. Her body was white and slim. Her breasts were small. Her nipples sort of tan. It struck Sharon that the woman's skin was incredibly smooth, like perfect sheets of expensive paper, and there was no doubt that she was beautiful. It made Sharon wish for a moment to be that young again, but then she thought of these poor girls with their flat, scarred chests and their strange hair: she wouldn't have traded with them for a second. To have to wonder about all of that again, to *really* not know who you are—you couldn't pay her a million dollars to deal with a single day of it. It made her very sad to think of.

The woman smiled at them, sweetly and serenely. She wasn't coy like the other women; she wasn't winking. She smiled at them a little longer and then spread her legs wide. Cora cleared her throat, shifted loudly in her chair, and Jamie snapped around to look at her, as if she were afraid Cora was about to make a scene. Jamie's eyes were bulging just like Cora's and her face was very red. Several other people, people sitting behind them, cleared their throats too and others gasped softly. A wave of whispering passed over the crowd. It was frightening to imagine what this naked woman was going to do. Sharon didn't know if she could sit through it, not here in front of all of these people, not right beside her daughter and her daughter's lover.

After the wave of whispering passed over them, after it was shushed by whoever the shushers were, the room fell completely silent. The woman sat up even straighter, scooted her bottom to the edge of her chair, and raised her arms as if she were about to play the cello. Her form was quite careful; her fingers stretched wide apart. A recording of Bach's Suite No. 2 for Cello Solo came on. It started up slowly like an old record. It sounded like solid beams of energy stretched into something you couldn't touch and pulled like light through a dark window, like shreds of heat fighting against cold air. Sharon knew the song because of Richard. Years ago he liked to get drunk and listen to it over and over again. He had gotten angry when they played it in Mercedes commercials.

As the music went on the woman played. She closed her eyes. She moved her arm as if wielding a bow. She stretched her fingers as if she were reaching for the notes. Her head fell slightly to one side and her body swayed, just as it might have if she were really making the music that they heard, just as if she were watching herself play the beautiful song inside her head. Jamie sputtered. She let out a loud cackle of a laugh and then slapped her hand over her mouth. She turned to Sharon. There were tears running down her face. Sharon turned back to the woman who looked so poignant, whose skin was so soft, like fine paper. Her breasts swung a little. Sharon thought again of being young, of Kelley and of Richard. She started crying too.

The crying seemed to be contagious. Sharon looked at Kelley. She also had tears on her face. Marjorie was leaning against Kelley's shoulder, her own tears making a wet spot on Kelley's shirt. Down the line they were all crying, staring at the woman, staring past her, out the window behind her, into the dark night. Sharon became aware that the

audience was watching them, wondering, she thought, at the tears of the yuppie women, the blissful ignorants. And yet every face she saw was wet with tears.

Maybe Sharon and her running women had started it, but everyone in the whole place was crying now. They were sobbing and shaking. Their hands pressed over their mouths, their hands pressed over their hearts. The woman with the dildo was crying and so was the elderly woman in the flowered dress. The normalish looking girls and ones wearing dog collars. The women with breasts and the women without them. The men dressed as women, the men dressed as men. All of them in tears. She looked up at the stage. The woman kept playing. She played even better now, with tears on her own face so pretty, so serious and absorbed. She looked as if she might float up into the air, carried off in waves like sound itself.

Then, as they sat there crying and listening, something came down on them inside the strange room; it was a heaviness, the presence of a spirit or some formidable ghost. It seemed to drift down and settle over them like snow when the night is very still. To Sharon it seemed like something tangible and holy; it seemed like something that couldn't be real, but was. You could feel it running up and down the rows of seats like electricity, like magnets pulling. When the song was over the woman opened her eyes. "Thank you," she said softly and she smiled at them again. She looked directly at Sharon and Kelley and the rest of them. "Thank you," she said again and then she stood up, her hand on the invisible cello. She bowed, letting the fingers of her free hand brush against the floor, and carried her cello off the stage.

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"Let's get out of here," Kelley said when the show was finished, after the performers had taken their second round of bows. They filed out of their row quickly and pushed through the door.

Out on the sidewalk the night was cool. They all stood together in a small circle, looking at each other like they had just been bonded by some strange trial: stuck for hours in an elevator, lost at sea, stranded with a hijacker in the utility closet of a high rise office building. Sharon looked at her daughter who was looking at her feet on the pavement. "Look up," she wanted to say, "look up." She took her own advice, let her own head fall back. The sky was clear and bright with stars.

"I didn't know it got so cold in the desert," Jamie said quietly. She looked around like she didn't know quite where she was. "What are you supposed to do after something like this?"

Sharon looked at her and shrugged. She and her women turned to Kelley, waiting for some answer.

"Lie down in the middle of a busy street," Kelley said. She didn't laugh until the women grew uncomfortable, shifting their weight from side to side. "It was supposed to be a joke," she said then, and smiled.

Everyone pretended to laugh and Marjorie said, "Baby, I'd rather get some ice cream."

Jamie really laughed now. She sounded excited. "Actually that's what I was hoping you'd say."

Jamie's excitement rubbed off on the rest of them. They all began to chatter. "Have you had that kind of frozen yogurt that really has live cultures in it?" Cora said,

mostly to Marjorie. "It's incredibly delicious." Dawn said something about goat's milk: "It's not like you think," she added. They kept chattering as they turned and walked through the parking lot, all six of them in a row. When they reached the sidewalk, Sharon slowed down. She didn't want to talk. She let herself fall behind the others. The world was very still and she felt everything coming in close, all of the detail vivid. She wanted to tell someone that the world was really something. A balance of something so beautiful it hurt to look at and so uncomfortable it hurt to look at, so dull that you were sleeping with your eyes open and so interesting you couldn't look away. Around her there was everything. There were rusting cars and shiny windows and gas stations with blinking lights. The branches of a willow tree hung over the top of a chain link fence and behind the fence two dogs lay sleeping beside a dog house. One of the dogs had his head resting on the other's stomach and their front paws were intertwined. Both of the dogs looked up at the women, decided they were harmless, went back to sleep. Sharon looked down and saw a small yellow flower growing out of a crack in the sidewalk. She thought of those flowers you heard about, the ones that only bloomed in the moonlight. She wondered if they existed at all.

Turning at the corner the moon became visible, out of nowhere, like it had risen in at the speed of time lapse photography. A collective gasp came from the women in front of Sharon. She had to admit it was beautiful: not quite full and so white it looked frozen, almost blue. She thought of someone holding his breath. A child, an old man, frightened women on stalled buses. "Kelley," she said softly. She ignored the other women when they turned around to look at her. She looked at her daughter, smiled at her. "Walk with me," she said.

ONE WAY TO FIND OUT

Carol had found her sitting against the wall at the bottom of the stairwell. Andrea had only been at the temp job for five weeks and looking back she was glad that it was Carol who found her and not someone else. Someone else might have thought too much about the incident. Someone else might have been inclined to get a new temp.

She had been sent upstairs to grab a stack of buyer contracts and on the way down, at the bottom of the last flight, she had dropped them all. Something happened when she was on the floor picking the papers up. She started to feel like she was deep underwater, like she didn't know which way was up. There was sickly, grey light and the air was dusty. There were sounds like people banging on pipes, sending secret messages that she didn't understand, calling for help that she couldn't give. She gathered all the papers, but it didn't feel safe to stand all the way up; it seemed liked the ceiling was close and the space was crowded; a tiny room behind a bookcase, a tunnel underground. She crawled to the wall and leaned against it. She tried to hold onto the part of herself that was saying, "It's a stairwell, this is your office building," but the other voice was louder: "Who can know what's going on exactly?" Really it wasn't really saying anything, it was simply a feeling, the feeling you get when you listen to a seashell. A feeling of something very empty and very old. When the stairwell door opened, she screamed.

"Andrea?" Carol said, like she really wasn't sure who it was.

When Andrea saw the look on Carol's face, she almost started crying. She was glad she couldn't see herself.

"Are you sick?" Carol said, sharply this time.

Andrea shook her head. "My blood sugar," she said. "It gets weird sometimes."

"Oh, God," Carol said, but she didn't seemed completely convinced. Her eyes looked soft and scared, but she recovered herself. "I hate that," she said finally. "It happens to me all the time. You have to eat things with a low glycemic index."

Andrea nodded. She stood up.

"Come in here," Carol said. "I keep some trail mix in my desk drawer."

She followed Carol to their office.

*

After that incident, there was a vague intimacy between them. Andrea was just a temp who had been set up at a desk in the corner of Carol's office, but Carol took an interest in her, talking to her all the time. Carol talked a lot, mostly into her headset telephone. It had taken Andrea at least six months to figure out when Carol was talking to her and when she was taking a phone call. Carol didn't turn to look at you when she talked to you, but spoke to her computer screen just as she did when she was on the phone. The difference was in her tone of voice. Her phone voice was loud and cheerful, her speaking voice softer and more confidential. Andrea tried to laugh as much as she could when Carol told jokes. She tried to answer Carol's questions vaguely. Once Carol had asked about her family, and Andrea told her about her husband, Dodd. But Carol said, "Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

That question made Andrea feel like she was in grade school. "I have a twin brother," she said.

"Really?" Carol said, "That's kind of awesome."

"Yeah," Andrea said.

Carol looked at her, then, as if she expected more. "Where does he live?" she asked finally.

Andrea closed her mouth tight. She looked at this woman with her spiked hair and her headset that maybe never came off; her secret wife named Lisa and her ugly expensive running shoes. She felt a tenderness that seemed very much like love and, whatever she did, she didn't want to lie. She said, "Pennsylvania, I think, but I don't really don't know for sure."

Something opened in Carol's face, her breath seemed to catch inside of her. She shook her head. "I don't speak to my brothers either."

"My mom was weird," Andrea said, which was how she always explained it. Her mother had been sick, that was the truth, but they hadn't known it at the time. "I think we just got fed up with taking care of each other."

Carol blinked and spoke very slowly, "It's funny how it all works out."

The longer she worked there, the more she talked to Carol. After she had turned down the offer of a permanent position, Carol said, "Hey, what are you doing here, anyway?"

"I like it here," Andrea said.

Carol turned around then, making a skeptical face. "Didn't you go to college? Aren't you supposed to be an artist or something?"

This made Andrea laugh. "I studied art history," she said. "That's what you do when you can't figure out anything else you like."

Carol smiled at this and tipped her head to one side. "Yeah, right," she said, sounding a little like a teenage boy. "You need to get yourself out of here."

After that Carol introduced her to sales representatives and other visitors as "the art professor" and grumbled for her when the office assistants asked her to run errands. "You shouldn't let them boss you around," Carol would say, when someone asked her to run a message up to the executive suite. "But that's my job," Andrea would reply. Carol would turn and look at her and shrug. "Still," she said, "I don't like the tone."

It was a tone that Andrea had more or less encouraged. She was thirty-three, the same age as most of the women she worked with, but she pretended to be younger than she was because she felt so different. She took orders from everyone and did all the things the other women seemed to find beneath them. She dug through supply closets looking for paper plates when there was cake for somebody's birthday. She ran up and down the stairs with messages when a phone call would have been sufficient. She made spreadsheets that were useless beyond looking professional and typed labels for files that no one would ever see again. She did all this because of that feeling, the sense that she'd slipped through the cracks, that she'd gotten away with something. She didn't have to fight with kids about what to wear to school or whether or not they'd done their homework. Dodd did their laundry and it had never occurred to her to check his pockets for suspicious receipts or money he was hiding from her (she told him about that and he said, "Huh," as if putting stuff in pockets was a new idea, "I usually put things in my wallet."). Often it was she who wanted sex at odd hours, she who fell asleep on the couch watching TV. The other women in the office talked about their husbands doing things like this and also about things they'd seen on Oprah reruns the night before. Andrea never knew what to say. There was, apparently, one show where Suzanne Summers had been featured as a medical specialist. "Suzanne Summers doesn't know

anything about cancer," she'd said when she heard that. A transcriptionist named Elaine had looked at her and dropped her chin, "I imagine Suzanne Summers knows a lot of things we don't know." Andrea hadn't known what to do then. She finally settled on nodding enthusiastically.

*

Over coffee that morning, Andrea had been telling Dodd about all this, about Suzanne Summers and the women at the office. That's why there had been a fight. She thought about it that way. There had been a fight—an event that occurred inexplicably, without either of them really participating in it, or wanting it, or believing anything they said. There had been a fight, but now it was over. Or, at least, it had stopped. The fight had stopped because they were in the car and the car was clean and still and calm. It was a little like being in a cathedral, with that cool smell of wet granite. The stale water Dodd would dip his fingers in, before running them across her forehead. The way it didn't matter that neither of them believed a bit of it. At least not the way you were supposed to.

The car was new. Today was only the fourth time Andrea had been in it. She'd been with Dodd when he'd taken it for a test drive at the dealership. He'd looked at her just after they pulled away from the salesman at the curb. He had grimaced and smiled and shook his head. "I feel," he had said, "like I'm going to break it." Then they had giggled all the way to the I-85 on ramp. After that things had seemed serious and real. Dodd had rolled all the windows down and she had taken off her shoes and put her feet up on the dashboard. They didn't speak until she closed the windows and put her hand

on the back of his neck. She said, "Will it be *this* car?" "That we actually buy?" Dodd said, and she nodded. He shrugged then, "A brand new version, I guess." And he had not had to tell her that he'd never bought a new car before, never driven anything this nice. "I think we should have *this* one," she said and he had laughed. She'd driven the car after he did, but it made her uncomfortable. It accelerated very easily, with only a little pressure from her foot, and she didn't like having to be so careful.

Now they owned it and that made it seem even less real somehow. The car's interior was gray leather, soft like expensive gloves, the kind they probably didn't make anymore. She pressed the side of her face against the back of her seat and looked at Dodd again. He was concentrating on driving in a way that made her sad. His eyes wide and his mouth solemn. So much focus on something that didn't really require it. But this was where he had wanted to get to, this car, the job that made it possible, the place where they were going now, a small lake that they both hated. It was manmade and crammed with boats that belonged out in the ocean. Suburban Charlotte had barely fallen away—they'd just passed a swanky strip mall two minutes ago—but already you could see the tops of those boats, through the window's perfectly clear glass.

"The windows will never be this clean again," she said.

He looked over at her like he'd forgotten she was there. "Oh," he said, "come on now."

"What?" she said and she laughed at the way his mouth was pinching down at the corners.

"So dramatic." His voice was kind of sweet, but he immediately shifted his eyes back to the road.

She wanted to touch him, to snap him out of it, but she didn't know what she would say after that. The air conditioning was on high and she leaned forward to turn it down. Leaning back she ran her hand over his forearm. "I'm pregnant," she could say. But that would be only guessing. She still hadn't worked up the nerve to take the test.

They were going to spend the day on a boat with his boss from the law firm, a big, rich corporate thing. It was an obligation, something they agreed to do because he had always wanted to make partner in this sort of outfit. "You've read too many John Grisham novels," she'd told him the first time he'd confessed it, years ago, when they were barely dating. He had winced and lowered his eyes and she had felt something terrible, some real pain. "So have I," she said, lying desperately. He had looked up at her. "You have not," he'd said and he had started laughing. After that he'd confessed to all of it: he wanted a mahogany desk and a tastefully expensive car, the kind of suits you cannot buy off the rack. It appealed to her in an inverted way, to have those things and not to want them, to have those things while holding some vivid memory of not having them at all.

"I don't really mind the job," she said now. That's what they had been fighting about. She was thirty-three years old and she'd had eleven jobs since she'd graduated from college. The one she had now was the one she'd had the longest—two years already. It seemed to her like it was time to move on. "It's a temporary job," she'd told him when he questioned her. And he had said, "It's only temporary because you wouldn't take the permanent position they offered you." "No shit," she had said. "I didn't take it because I didn't want it. That's what I'm telling you."

The lake was in full view now. Sailboats trapped like birds in a cage. They never got to stretch themselves. She turned the air conditioner back up again and he caught her hand and held it.

"I guess you'll just have to keep looking until you find a job you like," he said, sinking down in his seat a bit. He looked at her. "If you really think that will make you happy."

It was the way he said it that made Andrea want to slap him, the way he said happy. As if happiness was some silly thing she was obsessed with. "I never said anything about being happy," she said and she felt herself looking at him—sneering at him—in a way that made her feel like her mother. It was the face wild animals made when they were in danger, the expression of creatures who couldn't distinguish between different kinds of hurt. She relaxed her face because he wasn't a predator, because she didn't want to be like her mother. A lot of women said that stupidly, because they didn't want to feel old, they didn't want to get fat; they said it, but they didn't really mean it. She said it because she didn't want to die in a mental institution.

"That's true," he said and his mouth got solemn again. "You've never said anything about being happy."

She hated herself then. Here he was the only person in the world she loved, so exclusively it embarrassed her, made her worry. You were supposed to love a lot of people: family and friends, the man who worked at the cheese counter in Whole Foods, that girl who'd been your best friend in high school. She didn't love any of those people, she barely even knew any of those people. Once she had known her brother. And she sort of knew Carol. But more than anyone there was Dodd.

And none of it was his fault. All of this trouble had started a long time ago. With her mother and before her mother, with whatever had made her mother what she had been. Andrea looked at him now, pulling the car into the marina parking lot. She looked at him and knew that he should have married someone else. "I don't mind the job," she said again. She said a lot of things very quickly. Anything she could think of that might fix it, that's what she would say. "I like Carol," she said, looking around at the other cars in the parking lot. A mini-van, an Escalade, a small red convertible. "Carol's great. I don't know. Maybe we should have a baby."

He took the key out of the ignition and sat back in his seat, back against the soft leather. "Before all of my sperm rots," he said and laughed. He was quoting her, she had said that the last time he'd brought up babies. She had said, "Not now," and he had said, "Well, when?" "Before all of your sperm rots." That had been her answer.

When he laughed now he sounded angry. He had always been the one who wanted kids. She was the one who wasn't sure she could handle it. Maybe he was starting to believe her; maybe that was why he thought she was joking.

"Sperm doesn't rot," she said and she looked down at the plush gray carpet on the floor of the car. Like the carpet in a fancy hotel. She raised her head and stared at the side of his face. When he shaved too fast, he got these tiny little bumps around his jaw line. She wondered if they hurt him, why she'd never asked him about that before. He didn't turn to look at her. That was what she really wanted, the only thing she could think of now. She pretended to cough.

"You okay?" he asked, turning finally.

She nodded and leaned toward him and brushed the back of her hand against the side of his face. "Does that hurt you?" she asked.

He shook his head like he wasn't sure exactly what she meant. "It's okay," he said.

They sat there looking through the shining windshield. The couple they were meeting was standing at the end of the closest dock. Dodd's boss, Bill, and his wife, Mickie. He was wearing a polo shirt and she was wearing a tennis dress that looked like his shirt only longer. Dodd was wearing jeans and a zip-up sweatshirt with the name of their college on it. She was wearing jeans and that striped shirt he'd bought her when they'd lived in Maryland and she was learning how to sail. Mickie saw them and waved coolly, like she was embarrassed, like she didn't want to be there either.

Andrea and Dodd looked at each other.

"I guess we're supposed to get out now," Dodd said. He counted to three and they opened their doors in unison.

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The dock swayed in a way that made Andrea nervous, but seeing the boat made her feel better. It was not like Andrea had expected. It was a forty foot yacht with beautiful peeling wood and patched sails. "Do y'all mind if we stay docked up?" Mickie asked. Her voice was sweet and very genteel, but Bill looked at her like she'd embarrassed him.

"Well, the jet skis," he said. "You take your life in your hands on a Saturday afternoon. We're thinking about giving up our lease on the slip. Moving the boat to the coast."

Dodd put his hands in his pockets and shifted his weight back on his heels. "I don't blame you," he said. "It's really a small lake."

Bill nodded gravely. "So small."

Mickie looked at Andrea and laughed. "It's not *that* small," she said. "Lord, you'd think it was a freaking puddle."

"Mickie," Bill said, embarrassed again.

Mickie looked at Andrea and smiled. She took her hand. "Why blame the boat when you can blame the lake?" she said and shook her head. "This boat's made for the bloody ocean." They walked ahead of the men, down the dock, and Mickie went on talking softly. "On our third date, Bill took me out on his father's sailboat." She paused and looked up at Andrea.

Andrea didn't know what she was waiting for. She nodded and tried to imagine her own face, the expression on it. She tried to smile gently then, and that seemed to do it: Mickie started talking again. "It was beautiful. We went way out into the middle of the ocean. Out to the edge of the damned world, it seemed like. It was gorgeous. And then I started barfing." She paused again and looked Andrea straight in the eye. Somehow her gaze felt like a challenge. "All over everywhere. And Bill turned as gray as a ghost, like he was going to die right there. He was practically crying. He just kept saying, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry. It's really not so bad.' It kind of broke my heart, he felt so sorry for me." She stopped in front of the boat and watched Dodd and Bill climb inside. Andrea stood beside her and looked out at the lake. Everywhere there was a boat or a jet ski or a swimming raft, all of them evenly spaced, maybe 50 yards apart. They looked like chess pieces on a giant board. Someone was running down the dock then, shaking it,

and Andrea wished she could sit down somewhere. Mickie didn't seem to notice; she just shook her head again and whispered, "We should have run for the freaking hills. Both of us."

"Why?" Andrea said. The word came out loud, before she had time to think about what she was saying. She was supposed to know why.

Mickie kept her eyes on the water. "Well, it was such a mess. It doesn't have to be such a mess."

Andrea thought of vomit splashing around the hull of the boat. That was not the kind of mess Mickie meant. She only meant that love didn't have to be so personal. Andrea smiled at Mickie and nodded, "Tell me about it," she said, but really she thought it was total garbage. What was the point, then, if it were not personal? Andrea watched the back of Mickie's gray head as she climbed down into the sailboat and she was glad that she hadn't really had a mother. There had been nobody to tell her all the silly shit that got you fucked up in the first place.

They sat on the deck of the boat, men on one side, women on the other. They ate soft cheese with small cubes of toasted bread and fresh cranberries soaked in some kind of syrup. "How did you do this?" Andrea asked and she hoped it would be a complicated thing to explain. She almost liked to hear Mickie talk, and she also didn't want Mickie asking them a bunch of questions. It was Bill who piped up. "It's an incredible process," he said and told all about how the cranberries were cured and then boiled and chilled in the refrigerator. "It's sort of like making beef jerky, I suppose." He got thoughtful for a second. "But I haven't ever made beef jerky."

Andrea realized that Mickie was making faces at him while he talked. She realized this because Dodd's eyes looked wide and scared. When Dodd saw Andrea looking at him, his eyes got warm and he smiled like he might laugh because he couldn't help it. He wouldn't though, he didn't. He was really good at not laughing when he wasn't supposed to. Once he had told her the trick: "Just say to yourself, 'Starving orphans, starving orphans.' If you say it fast enough, it will work every time." Of course it hadn't worked for Andrea. "Because I *want* to laugh," she had told him and he had smiled a helpless sort of smile. "Then laugh," he had said and his voice had been low and rough and sweet.

When the wine came out, Andrea started talking before Dodd could. "I can't drink this early in the day. Sometimes it makes me sick."

Mickie looked at her, a little bit disgusted. "I didn't peg you for a church girl."

Andrea shook her head. "Oh no," she said. "I just can't deal with physical discomfort."

Dodd made a strange sound and Andrea did not look at him. One glance and Mickie would know immediately.

"What's the deal?" Dodd said in the car, later.

She smiled without knowing why, without really wanting to. She didn't even know for sure that she was pregnant. And she didn't know if she could do it.

"No way," Dodd said. His face got red and he looked away from her. When he looked back, he was smiling. "Really?"

She laughed, like a fool. And like a fool she nodded.

He grabbed her and kissed the side of her neck.

She had to force herself to say, “I haven’t taken a test or anything, I just think maybe.”

He kissed her lips and the side of her face and her forehead and then tipped back to look at her. “Really?” he said again and started laughing, looking at her closely, waiting for her to answer.

“Well,” she said, “*Maybe*.”

He straightened up in his seat and started the car. As they were pulling out of the marina he said, “Really?” one more time.

“Dodd, stop it,” she said, but now she was laughing too.

*

On the way home they stopped at a grocery store to get something for dinner.

“What should we have?” Dodd asked her. “We should have something good.”

“Potatoes,” she said.

“Potatoes,” he said and looked at the parking lot like there was some question out there. “We can’t have just potatoes.”

“We could have potato salad and bratwurst and green beans.”

He looked at her with his mouth open a little bit. “That sounds amazing.”

He dropped her off at the store’s entrance and she went in, picking up a green shopping basket and tucking it into the crook of her arm like someone in a fairy tale. At this hour on a weekday there would be children weeping about pop tarts and mothers snapping out horrifying threats; there would be men in wrinkled suits buying cheap flowers and rotisserie chickens or cases of beer and cups of yogurt; there would be women muttering about apples and European butter or humming and looking at frozen

pizzas and making jokes to no one about how much they hated dinner. But today was Saturday; the store was quiet and full of a strange, weightless peace. The overhead lights seemed to chill everything and everyone moved like they were pleasantly circling just outside the Earth's orbit. One look at their faces told you they were not ready to come back.

Andrea liked the way things looked in the produce section: the bright colors of the vegetables and the piles of fruit that were haphazard but not quite out of control. There were things here that seemed special and unfamiliar, things she might never have seen before: poblano peppers so green they were almost black, fennel bulbs with long fronds that seemed to be growing still. There were shiny purple cabbages and potatoes with smooth skin and not a trace of dirt. These things seemed very important to her now and she put them in her basket, thinking vaguely of recipes she'd seen in magazines. Somehow they were a key to participating in the world, to accessing the secret pleasures of being alive. She picked out a baguette and a heavy loaf of rye bread and a jar of jam that cost seven dollars on sale.

Soon her basket was full and she thought about going to get a cart, but she didn't because

Dodd was waiting outside in the car. She had to hurry. He wouldn't know what had happened to her and he would begin to imagine terrible things. He never shut the car off when he waited in the parking lot, no matter how many times she asked him. Gas was being wasted and there was always the possibility that the battery might die. She panicked then and put the bread and the jam and the fennel back. It made her feel like she had when she was a kid, when things were bad and she and her brother would have to

shop for groceries with whatever money they could steal out of their mother's purse. You had to keep a close estimate in your head as you shopped and it was a good idea to round all the prices up to the nearest half dollar. Joel would always insist that they put one thing back, even if they were sure that they had enough money. He would pretend to be older than she was and say cross things in an artificially strained voice, "Andrea, it isn't worth it. Think about it, do you really want to have the checkout lady looking at you like that?" Maybe it was, she thought now. Maybe it was worth having the checkout lady look at you like that. Then at least there was a chance that you'd end up leaving with everything you wanted. She decided then that this thought had been the basic difference between them. But she stopped. She stopped herself. Whenever she thought of him she shook her head, to physically get him out of there, and she did it now. She'd let it go on a little too long. It was he who wanted to be away, after all, and when she tried to think of what his life was like now—his child and his wife and his house in Pennsylvania—nothing happened. Her mind seemed to drain away completely. Now she went back through the aisles to get what they needed. Hotdog buns and that kind of grainy mustard he liked so well. She also went down the soup aisle and got a couple of cans of Chicken and Stars because he liked that too, at least when he was sick, and sometimes they ran out of it. There were a number of things that seemed good to keep around and walking through the aisles she felt compelled to pick them up. That way they wouldn't have to run to the store tomorrow. She got oatmeal and shredded cheese and a couple bottles of decent wine. Also there was this ice cream made from coconut milk; they didn't sell it everywhere but this store had it and she went to figure out where it was. It was one of the most delicious things she had ever eaten.

The basket was very heavy and her other arm was also full. When she got to the ice cream freezers, a man in a leather jacket was standing in front of the one she wanted to get to. He saw her and said, "You've got a heavy load there." He laughed.

She tried to smile but she didn't want to talk to him. "Excuse me," she said. She tried to get past him and in the process she dropped the oatmeal and the hot dog buns.

The man stooped to pick them up immediately. "You need a cart," he said as he tried to balance the buns on top of the soup cans in the basket.

"I'm fine," she said, avoiding his eyes, feeling like she was a child again. Where was Dodd? Why hadn't he come in with her? The buns fell out of the basket again and the man reached for them, laughing harder this time. His hand brushed against hers when he stood back up. She didn't look at him. "Thank you," she said. "Thanks, I'm fine." She wanted to say go away and she almost did. All that stopped her was that small thing inside her, the steady pulse reminding her all the time, telling her that everything was really fine, even when it didn't seem like it was. She turned away from the man, toward the ice cream, but the man didn't go away.

"Is that stuff any good?" he asked.

She nodded and the buns fell again. She left them on the ground. She walked away as quickly as she could.

At the check-out counter, the woman gave her a strange look. "You doing okay today, ma'am?"

Andrea nodded. She slid her debit card through the reader too early.

"Hold on there," the woman said. "You're in a real rush. These machines run on their own clock, that's for sure."

Andrea looked down at her feet. The floor was dirty. The whole place was dingy and kind of disgusting. She tried to count backwards from ten, she tried to breathe. She couldn't think now why she had bought all of this stuff. Dodd would think she was ridiculous.

"Ma'am," the woman called as Andrea was walking away. "Your receipt?"

Andrea did not turn around or wave or anything. She ran out of there like she had stolen something, like she was getting away with murder. There was a black car waiting outside but it wasn't their car and she couldn't see their car anywhere. Dodd had been here, hadn't he?

It was like those moments when you forgot where your car was parked and you thought for a split second that it had been stolen; suddenly you glimpsed the whole of that experience: how terrible it would be. Or when you tried to unlock the doors of a car that looked like yours but wasn't. You panicked and panicked and thought unreasonable things: did someone change the locks on me, did someone switch my keys with their own? And then you saw the carseat in the back and you remembered you were one row over. But even after you knew everything was okay, you still couldn't quite shake the feeling: how close they were, these disasters, just a hair's breadth away from being real.

There was a man in the black car. Was it the man from the ice cream aisle? Andrea turned away from him. She turned to face the store, pretending like she was waiting for someone to come out, her husband or her kid or somebody. Somebody who would help her carry all these bags. The black car pulled closer to her and a hand stretched out from the window and waved. The man spoke to her, and she stepped close to the automatic doors, so close that they opened. Where was Dodd? It was like a

nightmare. She started to think the worst thing had happened. He had lost his patience, really. He had gotten tired of waiting and he had left her. Dodd wouldn't do that, but with people, sometimes, you never knew.

"Andrea," the man said again and she turned around to scowl at him, to wave him away. Now he was out of the car. She thought of the things they tried to teach you about self defense. Scream, go for the eyes with your car keys, don't be afraid. Don't be afraid. She looked at this man's face and backed toward the doors of the store. *Who* was *that*? Someone. She felt a little bit like maybe she was dying.

"Andrea," he said, loud this time, and he started coming closer to her. Something broke then, in her stomach. It was Dodd.

She looked him in the eyes and knew that he knew everything. It didn't matter, though, she didn't want to talk about it. "I just realized that I forgot the brats. I was in there all this time and I totally forgot them. I forgot the green beans too."

He came close to her and took one of the grocery bags. He put his free hand on her shoulder. "It's okay," he said. He was still looking at her. Maybe in the same way that Bill had looked at Mickie after she'd puked all over the boat. So sorry for me it kind of broke my heart.

"I forgot we had a new car," she said. She looked at him and she tried to tell him that she was sorry. That there was only a moment when she didn't know him and that moment didn't matter, didn't hold any weight against all the other moments of all the other days. It was just a funny twitch in her brain and it didn't mean anything. I do know you, she should have said. I do. There were tears in her eyes now, almost out of nowhere.

He took his hand off her shoulder and put it on the side of her face and leaned his forehead against hers. They stood like that for a moment and then he straightened up and took the other grocery bag she was holding. "Brats are gross," he said. "Let's just go home."

*

The next day Dodd bought a pregnancy test. He put it on the counter in their bathroom. Every time she went in there, he waited for her to come out. It didn't seem to matter where he was in the house. If she went into the bathroom, when she came out he would be there. He would look at her, waiting for her to say something. She would smile and shrug. "Not yet," she said.

"Not yet, what?" he said the first time.

"I didn't take it yet."

"Oh," he said. "Okay." He went back to reading the case briefs he'd spread out on the cream colored rug in their empty living room.

After a while he started to get impatient. "Why are you putting this off?" he asked.

"Look at me," she said stepping back into the bathroom. She turned the light on and faced the mirror. "Do you think I'm crazy?" she said.

His irises seemed to vanish, his pupils were so dilated. It scared her to look at him. "You're kidding me," he said. "I'm not doing this." He turned off the light and walked out of the room.

She started shouting after him. "What do you mean, you're not doing this? You signed up for this. You knew what was up." His footsteps were loud and she heard him

walk straight out of the house. He shut the door gently, though. As if everyone were sleeping.

She tried to think about where he would go. He would walk around the block a hundred times. He would wander through Dean and Deluca's until they closed. She remembered how he had been the sort of man you weren't supposed to marry: he worked too much, he didn't compromise about the right things, he'd dated a surprising number of women. She was glad now that there hadn't been anybody around to tell her that.

Her brother was the only person she'd ever talked to about Dodd. "You think this will work?" she'd asked her brother. She remembered how he'd had long straight hair. She remembered how he'd said, "Andrea, things don't magically work. You have to make them." Not long after that he'd stopped calling, stopped answering her calls. She had spent a lot of time thinking, but she could never isolate an event that might warrant such a break. And sane behavior, she had long ago decided, always had an antecedent and a consequence. Sane behavior made sense. It cut a slow path through the world. At least it was supposed to.

She didn't want to feel like she was waiting for Dodd to come back. She turned off all the lights in the house except for the kitchen. She put on Joni Mitchell's *Blue* very loud, her mother had listened to it all the time, and baked the sort of cake you saw in the windows of expensive bakeries. Years ago, when she worked in the department store, she had taken a class. She had taken a class because she liked the way batter began to ribbon when it was poured slowly, the way the chocolate and cream blended gradually when whisked—separated, separate, less separate, barely separate somehow suddenly together. The cake was four layers and three different kinds of chocolate and when Dodd

came back all he said was, “Do you know there’s chocolate all over the back of your neck?” He kissed her then and they made out while the cake was baking.

“You’re not crazy,” he said to her later, when they were in bed.

“I know that,” she said. “Sometimes.”

He was lying behind her, running his hand up and down her arm. “That’s true for everybody,” he said.

She flipped over, faced him. “Not like this,” she said. “This is a ballgame you ain’t never played.” She smiled at him and made a face.

“I know,” he said. “I forget that. It’s just that you’re so fucking normal.” He pretended to shake her.

She laughed. “Well, it’s one thing to be a little crazy when it’s just you. It’s another thing when there’s also this whole other person. You know what I mean?” She pressed her hand against the side of his face and felt how he closed his eyes and nodded.

*

It was quiet at work and Andrea was watching YouTube videos about running technique. The feet in the videos hit the pavement with a soft even tap. All strung together the taps made a lovely sound, a metronome without rigidity, something natural and calm. “I’m thinking of running a marathon,” she said to Carol, but she really wanted to tell her something else. She wanted to tell her about the baby.

Carol hesitated and Andrea got the sense that Carol watched what she said as much as Andrea did. Carol probably thought running was stupid. But what she actually said was, “That’s cool. That’s some pretty serious stuff.”

“I don’t know,” Andrea said. “I like to have a project.”

"Yeah," Carol said. "Our house is old, that's my project. There's always something going wrong."

"It's cool that you can do that," Andrea said. "Dodd doesn't know how to do that kind of stuff." She felt then like she was violating the agreed upon deception and so she added, "And I can't do that kind of stuff either."

Carol looked at her, different somehow. "Well, you know, it keeps me busy."

Whenever Carol left the office, Andrea switched to the Planned Parenthood website. The test had been positive. She would have to leave Dodd, probably. It would ruin her whole life forever. But you couldn't bring somebody into the world and hand them a huge mess. "Here you go, kid. Good luck." Of course, you could do that; half the fucking population did that. But she couldn't. It would have probably made her even crazier.

Andrea listened for Carol's footsteps in the hallway and almost every time she managed to get the browser window shut before Carol would have been close enough to see. The last time, though, she must have been a little slow.

"What are you *doing*?" Carol said. Her voice sounded silly and she smiled at Andrea coyly. Andrea tried to imagine what Carol thought she was doing. Writing sexy emails. Looking at shoes. Ordering pills from an on-line pharmacy.

Andrea suddenly couldn't think of what to say. She sat looking at Carol. She tried to keep her eyes open wide.

Carol sat down in her chair, but she didn't turn to face the computer right away. She looked at Andrea and then at the floor.

Andrea looked away and when she looked back Carol was looking at her again. The words just came out of her. "I'm pregnant," she said. "And I can't keep the baby."

Carol looked physically repulsed. It was the only thing Andrea had ever said that Carol couldn't handle. She seemed to be shrinking back, desperate to get as far away as possible.

"No," Andrea said. "It's just that my mother was crazy."

"Yeah, I guessed that," Carol said. "But still."

"Wait," Andrea said. "How did you guess it?" She thought about that time nearly two years ago, in the stairwell.

"The way you said 'sick' when you talked about her. I always think about you and your brother. People say all this stuff about twins. I keep thinking you wouldn't have survived if you hadn't been twins."

Andrea snapped her head back. "It's not like she was going to kill us."

Carol narrowed her eyes. "How am I supposed to know that? You're the one who said she was crazy. You're the one who's about to have an abortion without telling her husband."

Andrea turned to face her computer. "That's enough," she said. Her mother would not have killed them. She had done the best she could. Still it was not something Andrea could think about very critically. It was not something she could think about at all. "You'll be okay if you just let it go," the best therapist had said. "Just forget it." And Andrea had doubted her. "I didn't say you'll be perfect," the woman had said then, adjusting the band of her watch. "I said you'll be okay. And that's all you can really ask

for." Andrea still wondered if the woman meant that okay was all anybody could ask for, or if that was all *she* could ask for.

She realized that Carol was still turned around in her chair, looking at her, waiting for her to say something else. "I'm sorry," Andrea said, facing her again.

Carol made a scoffing noise. "Don't apologize to me." Then there was a long silence. "I don't know," she said. "Maybe I should apologize too."

Andrea nodded.

"But, okay, explain this to me. I still don't understand what the problem is. You think you're crazy?"

"I don't know. It seems possible."

Carol smirked then, almost laughed. Andrea could imagine her saying, "Starving orphans, starving orphans," in her head. And it worked: Carol kept smirking, but she didn't laugh. "Well," she said, like it was kind of obvious, "is your brother crazy?"

Andrea shrugged. She had no idea.

The phone rang then and Carol reached up to switch on the headset. She said, "What you ought to do is find your brother," and then she turned to face the computer screen, saying, "Hello, this is Carol," in her strongest telephone voice.

*

Andrea looked online and found the White Pages for the town where he used to live. His number was unlisted, but the address was there. Joel and Marie Latner, 3400 West Road. He had moved, but only to a different zip code.

At the Philadelphia airport she got directions from the rental car guy. "It's real pretty out there," he said. He seemed to be studying her face and she started to worry that

there was something strange about the way she looked. "You going for a visit?" he asked then.

She nodded, looking at the man's hands. He was wearing a heavy ring on every finger. You weren't supposed to marry men who wore lots of rings; she had actually seen that written once, in a women's magazine. "My brother," she said. "He gives bad directions."

"Your husband didn't join you, I see." He winked at her after he said it.

Andrea narrowed her eyes. "He's coming tomorrow," she said. She smiled at the man but turned away without saying anything else. She thought she had learned already not to let people do that, to let them make her feel suspicious of herself.

He was right about the drive, though. It was beautiful. Around the airport everything was clutter, cheap hotels and gas stations and overnight parking lots circled with barbed wire, all of it hazy with jet fuel and no shade. A few miles later that had all vanished. There was only farmland. She remembered flat land in Indiana and Illinois, land that felt like desert and made the sky feel far away. But this land was deep green and rolling and the sky was just above it. The horizon was hardly visible and where the land dipped you could catch a glimpse of something blue and spotless. There were low telephone wires strung near the highway and they scalloped like garlands. She rolled down her window and pushed her hand against the wind.

The first right was County Road H. She took it and pulled over. A ways down this road there was another right turn—that would be her brother's road, according to the rental car guy. On flat ground you could see a long way, you could get a sense of how the road went, but on this land there was no telling. She didn't want to get there yet. She

didn't want it to surprise her. She called Dodd. "What are the small green plants that grow really close to the ground?" she asked him when he first picked up.

"Uh," he said. "It seems like that could be any number of things."

She could hear his car radio even though he'd probably already turned it down. He was listening to those loud investment analysts on satellite CNBC. They were shouting about pork futures. "Pork doesn't have a future," Dodd had said once and surely she had laughed. She hoped now that she had. "I think it's soybeans," she said.

"Yeah?" he said, but she could tell he was paying attention to something else. "Why are you asking that?"

"You shouldn't answer when you're driving."

"You're driving too."

"Yeah, but I'm pulled over." She watched a flock of blackbirds descend onto a patch of land beside the road.

"I'm pulled over too," he said.

"No you're not," she said. "Do you think my brother is a soybean farmer?"

"A soybean farmer? I can't see that. He's not that kind of guy."

"What if he's all fucked up?"

"No," Dodd said. "I don't think so."

She waited, then, for what she knew he would say next. She could imagine him, lovely, squinting and flipping down the sunshade.

"But there's only one way to find out."

*

West Road was a dirt road and her brother's house was the only one on it. It was not white like she expected, the paint was not peeling. There was no weather vane and no scraggly brush around the mailbox. The house was stone with an old fashioned slate roof. It had a red door. The glass of the storm door was not smudged at all.

She didn't feel comfortable pulling into the driveway, but she did it anyway because the road was so narrow. The gravel crunched under her tires. It seemed very loud to her, like the world was conspiring to warn people about her. She figured they would be waiting for her at the door, but when she got to the door she could only hear somebody inside playing the piano. She knocked and nothing happened. She stood there, feeling like a stranger. She turned away and looked out at the road, at the trees across from the house. They were tangled up in the telephone line. She knocked again and this time the piano stopped. She heard strong footsteps and somebody fumbling with the lock.

She had looked away from the door and when she looked back, Marie was standing there, in the small space that had opened. "Andrea," she said, like a question, and then she opened the door wider.

Inside the house there was a girl sitting on the piano bench and Andrea could tell that Marie had been sitting next to her. There were music books strewn on the floor around the bench. Marie put her hand on Andrea's shoulder and guided her into the room. The room was small and boxy, kind of cramped, and the baby grand piano took up most of it. Marie acted like she'd never seen the room before. They looked around the room together, at the couch against the wall, at the wide doorway that led to the dining room and, beyond that, another doorway to the kitchen. In the kitchen Andrea could see

a coffee maker on the counter. Part of the refrigerator, neatly spotted with photographs. Just beside her there was a large potted lily, the kind people sent you when somebody died. The girl on the piano bench watched them. She had her mouth open, like she couldn't believe what was going on. Marie finally said, "Nora, this is Andrea."

Andrea smiled at the girl. She raised her hand like she might wave. "Hi," she said.

The girl said, "Hi," but it came out as a whisper.

Andrea tried to see a resemblance, that thing people talked about, seeing yourself, eerily, in some other person. But she couldn't really look, she couldn't really tell.

Marie said, "Joel works late on Thursdays." She guided Andrea to the couch.

Andrea had not thought about this part. What was she supposed to do now? "How have you been?" she said then, and shook her head. It felt wrong.

"Oh, you know," Marie said. "We're doing good."

Andrea nodded. She looked at the girl who was still sitting at the piano. She had turned her body half way around, her palms flat against the bench. She was watching Andrea like Andrea was something playing on a screen.

"You drink coffee, right?" Marie said.

Andrea shook her head. "Only in the morning."

"Oh," Marie said, nodding as if this was a very important piece of information, one that she should be careful to remember. A white cat came out from behind the lily and slunk toward the piano bench.

The girl's eyes got wide and softly she said, "Monkey, go hide." She swung her feet and the cat crouched, watching the little shoes move back and forth. Moving its head

up and down in a barely perceptible way. It made Andrea think of a ballet dancer shaking, just a little bit, toward the end of a difficult show. The girl began to swing her feet more quickly and the cat leapt. It made a brief whine, like it already knew it wasn't going to catch anything. The girl laughed and looked over at them shyly, as if she suddenly felt embarrassed to be a child. She slipped down onto the floor beside the cat, beside the foot pedals of the piano. The girl used the cat's paws to push on the pedals and they all watched the rods move up and down. Andrea thought of a cat's paws smashing. If the girl had been her child, she would have said, "Okay, now, be gentle."

"Do you drink tea?" Marie asked her. She looked at Andrea. "I drink tea now," she said.

"Really?" Andrea said. She didn't want to refuse everything. "Tea would be great, thank you."

Marie got up and headed for the kitchen. "Come on, Nora," she called back to the girl. Nora looked at Andrea warily, crawled out from under the piano, and ran out of the room. Andrea could hear Marie scold the girl in the kitchen. "We don't run in the house." Then she heard her say, "Do you know who that is?" What the girl said in reply Andrea couldn't hear. "That's your daddy's sister." Andrea watched the cat underneath the piano. It looked at her like it didn't want to be looked at and then it slunk back behind the lily and out of sight.

It didn't seem like this was going to be what she expected, though she wasn't sure now what she had expected. She wondered if she'd only done this because of Carol, because of Carol and maybe also Dodd. There was something in her that began to panic. What were they doing? What were any of them doing? Why had she let it all work out

this way? She couldn't sit here waiting, she had to try again. She stood up to go into the kitchen and saw the little girl coming toward her. She was holding a round white cookie in her hand, all of her fingers grasping it so that it looked like a cookie in the mouth of a shadow puppet. For some reason Andrea thought of that fable about the fox and the crow, all those things falling from the crow's mouth. The grapes, the cheese.

"Here," Nora said, holding the cookie out. She was still standing half a room away.

"Oh," Andrea said just as Marie called, "Nora, put it on a plate." Andrea smiled at Nora and walked closer. "I don't need a plate," she said. And then she added, "Thank you," as if she had just been reminded of her manners. "Did you make it?"

Nora nodded, her eyes closed slightly. That looked like Joel, Andrea thought, it looked like her. And that seemed to change everything. "Very good," she said, taking a bite, holding her free hand under her chin to catch the crumbs. So that Marie wouldn't mind her, wouldn't mind her barging in. Nora walked back to the kitchen and Andrea followed. She said to Marie, "Your house is lovely."

Marie smiled like she'd recovered herself. She was drying some dishes. "Thank you. I was just about to do some supper. Do you guys still live in Charlotte?"

Andrea nodded. "We do." And now it was all out in the open. They had known each other, not so very long ago, and they knew each other now.

They talked about Nora's school and ate baked chicken and mashed potatoes from a mix. "I love these mixes," Andrea said. She was glad she stopped herself before adding, 'Dodd thinks they taste like soap.'

After supper, Marie had set them up at the table with a deck of cards. She had gone into the laundry room just off the kitchen. From time to time she had popped her head in and Andrea could see that she didn't want the girl left alone with her. She knew this because when Joel got home, Marie disappeared. Like a shift change at a hospital. When he got home, they were still sitting at the kitchen table and Nora was lining up the cards for a second round of solitaire. She played deftly. She flipped the cards over very slowly and arranged them meticulously, all of them evenly spaced. Andrea was watching her closely and she didn't hear Joel come in. He put his hand on the top of her head and startled her, but she didn't jump. She only recognized his hand, the weight of it, and felt the sort of feeling she had forgotten. She had put him out of her mind completely. And, now, here he was. "Hey," she said, looking up at him.

"Can you believe she's such a card shark?" he asked her, tipping his head in Nora's direction. Nora looked at him and smiled. He jingled his car keys in the hand that was not on top of Andrea's head.

Joel went to the refrigerator and took out a white take-out box. "What did you have for dinner?" he asked. Andrea could tell he was not talking to her.

"I don't remember," Nora said. And then she said, "Chicken," wrinkling her face.

Joel mimicked her expression. "Chicken," he said. "You like that."

Nora shook her head. "Not today."

"Tomorrow then," he said. He got a fork out of a drawer and sat down beside Andrea, ate some noodles out of the box. He said, "Sometimes we get Thai food delivered," in a confidential tone.

"Really?" Andrea said and felt silly, like she had just arrived from Mars, where delivery was hard to come by.

Joel laughed. "Really," he said.

"We always eat it at the restaurant," she said. "Or in the car."

"In the car?" he said, making it sound unthinkable and adventurous.

She smiled at him and nodded. "In the car," she said.

"Do you want some?"

She shook her head and immediately regretted it. She liked how he had wanted to share. They watched Nora line up the cards and Andrea felt like they were at a dance recital or kindergarten play. They should have been running the camera, keeping record of Nora's improvements. Andrea put her hand on her brother's shoulder.

When Joel finished the noodles and got up, his footsteps made the floor creak. She heard him throw the box in the trash. He came back to the table and sat down again. He was close enough that when he moved his knee it touched hers. When that happened he said, "Oh, sorry," and they smiled at each other. She felt odd, embarrassed that she wanted to keep touching him. Just to see that he was really there.

Nora had finished lining the cards up. She rested her chin in the palm of her hand, studying them. She looked up and smiled. "The beginning," she said, "is the important part."

They both nodded, good students.

Nora looked down at the cards and only looked up at her father when she wasn't sure if she was making the right move. "Well," he would say then, "look it over one more time."

Andrea was relieved to see how patient he was. She looked at the side of his face and then straight ahead, past the girl, out the window, into the night that was two shades of darkness. The black land and the gray sky. She remembered once when they were children, a bit older than Nora was, maybe seven or eight, they were taking the city bus to some place she couldn't remember. She had been afraid, she couldn't remember why. Maybe they hadn't been sure where they were going, if they were on the right bus. And it had been dark, darker than this and cold, wintertime dark. A woman in a black coat had looked over at them, more than once, and Andrea had pressed the side of her leg into her brother's, to make sure that he noticed. When the bus stopped the woman had come over, holding onto the high handrail as she walked, saying, "What are you doing here without your mother?"

They had not said a word. They had stared straight ahead. The woman had said, "Where are your coats?" and Andrea had felt embarrassed. Where were their coats? She had wanted to tell a lie and say that their coats had been stolen, but she hadn't. She had known. If they didn't say anything, the woman would go away. And she had. It was a thing you could always count on, nobody would stay around forever.

"What do you do?" he asked her then.

"Work in an office. What about you?"

"Me too," he said. For some reason, they both laughed.

Marie came back then and Andrea saw that she'd been wrong; Marie was only busy, only giving them time alone. They joked for a long time, about the trials of offices and school and other things, bad things that had happened and were now behind them.

*

They had a guest bedroom and Marie showed her to it. "I'm glad you're here," she said and hugged Andrea shyly. Marie pulled away and left the room, shutting the door behind her.

Andrea got in bed and called Dodd.

"What are they like?" he said immediately. "Is he a soybean farmer?"

"No," she said and she was laughing. "They lease the land to these organic farmers. He works in an office. He's basically a stock broker or something, I don't know. They're kind of lovely. They have a daughter and she's beautiful. Their life is, like, very quiet and calm and orderly." She said these things and felt like somehow they had succeeded. "He's okay," she said. "He's fine."

"What's their daughter's name?" Dodd said and he sounded like he understood. Like he knew just how much this changed. It changed everything.

"Nora," she said and she lowered her voice. She felt like she was shouting. "I think she's named after my grandmother."

"Really?" he said.

"I don't know," she said. She had no idea what her grandmother's name was. "But it wouldn't surprise me. He might have known something about her. He paid more attention to things than I did." She listened then and everything was quiet. "Where are you?"

"On the porch, I fixed the lawn chair."

"Oh," she said and imagined him out there, all by himself. She wondered if he was thinking about how sad it was, not to know your grandmother's name. Maybe he wasn't. "How was your day?" she asked. "I wish you had come with me."

"No, it's good. You had to see for yourself. And now you know."

"Now I know," she said.

The room was too still to fall asleep in. Too dark. She had not slept by herself in a long time. She got up and opened the door a bit. She stepped out into the hallway. It was the kind of quiet where everyone was really sleeping.

*

When she woke up it was still dark and there were people's voices. She heard her brother say, "I thought we'd already discussed it." There was a wedge of light coming through the open doorway. She sat up and saw Nora on the floor beside her bed. She lay facing the light, but outside of it, stretched out on her stomach, her head propped up on her elbows. Andrea got out of bed, got down on the floor beside her. She had the cards laid out, for a game of solitaire, but it seemed like she hadn't started playing yet. It seemed like she just wanted to stare down at the floor, the game nothing but a pretense.

"Nora," Andrea said, "What are you doing?"

Nora looked at her like the question was kind of stupid.

Andrea heard Marie raise her voice and say, "No, we aren't. We are not."

"Lower your voice," Joel said, his voice getting louder.

Marie hissed then, "I wish you'd never been alive."

Andrea almost shut the door after that, but she wanted to hear it, to understand what kind of thing it was.

Joel's voice got deeper. "No that's what I wish. Then I would never have met you." The 'you' came out as a strange moan and Nora looked up at the ceiling.

Andrea shut the door, sorry that she had waited. She eased it closed, made sure it was silent. There was nothing less safe than this sort of fight, interrupted. People got ashamed then, and ashamed people were the most dangerous kind.

She switched the overhead light on. "Does this happen all the time?"

Nora raised one of her shoulders in a shrug.

"You always play cards in the middle of the night?" She tried to use a funny voice, but in the middle of the sentence she almost sobbed.

Nora said, "It's not really the middle of the night. It's actually the morning."

"It's dark outside," she said. "That means it's nighttime." She lay down on her stomach beside the girl. She must have been tall for her age, she seemed very long all stretched out like she was. "Show me how to play this game."

"You don't know?" Nora said, sitting up on her knees. Suddenly she seemed like a child again.

"No," she said and it was the truth. "I'm no good at cards."

"Well," Nora said. "You have to make them all in order." She explained the whole game, carefully and very patient. Her voice was clear, even at a whisper.

Andrea watched her. "You show me the first time," she said. The girl's hands were graceful, finely boned and precise. All of her seemed like that and Andrea began to feel like she was watching a songbird. The way a songbird looked unreal when you saw it up close, hopping, unwise and delicate, on a patio in the morning. There was something about it that seemed too amazing to be real, something about the detail of its feathers and the angular tip of its tiny head that made it seem more like a fairy or a specter. Something far beyond a common creature. Nora was like that. Her hair was

fine and she ran her hands through it absentmindedly, making single strands of it billow up and shine against the ordinary light. The beds of her fingernails were a very soft purple and her mouth twisted and smiled even now, even where they were, stranded here in the middle of the night.